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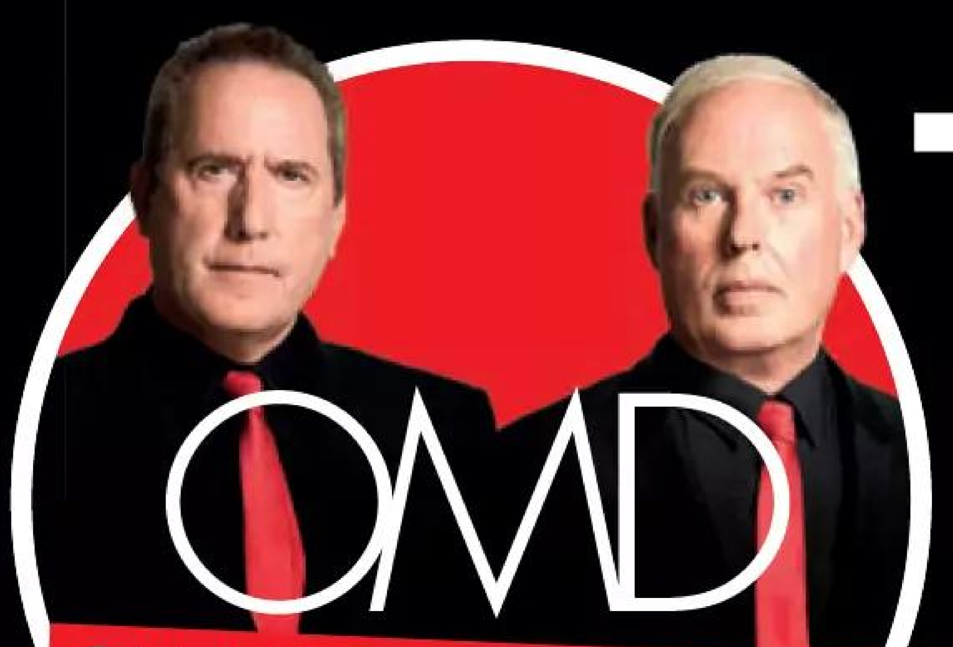

ON BAUHAUS STAIRCASE
"THIS REALLY MIGHT BE OUR LAST ALBUM"

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

DURAN DURAN

"AT THIS POINT, WE CAN DO WHATEVER WE WANT AND THIS RECORD MAKES US SMILE. IT'S RECAPTURED OUR SENSE OF FUN!"

THE BAND REVEAL ALL ABOUT THEIR HALLOWEEN-THEMED NEW ALBUM DANSE MACABRE

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"SONGS ARE POWERFUL IF THE MESSAGE IS RIGHT!"

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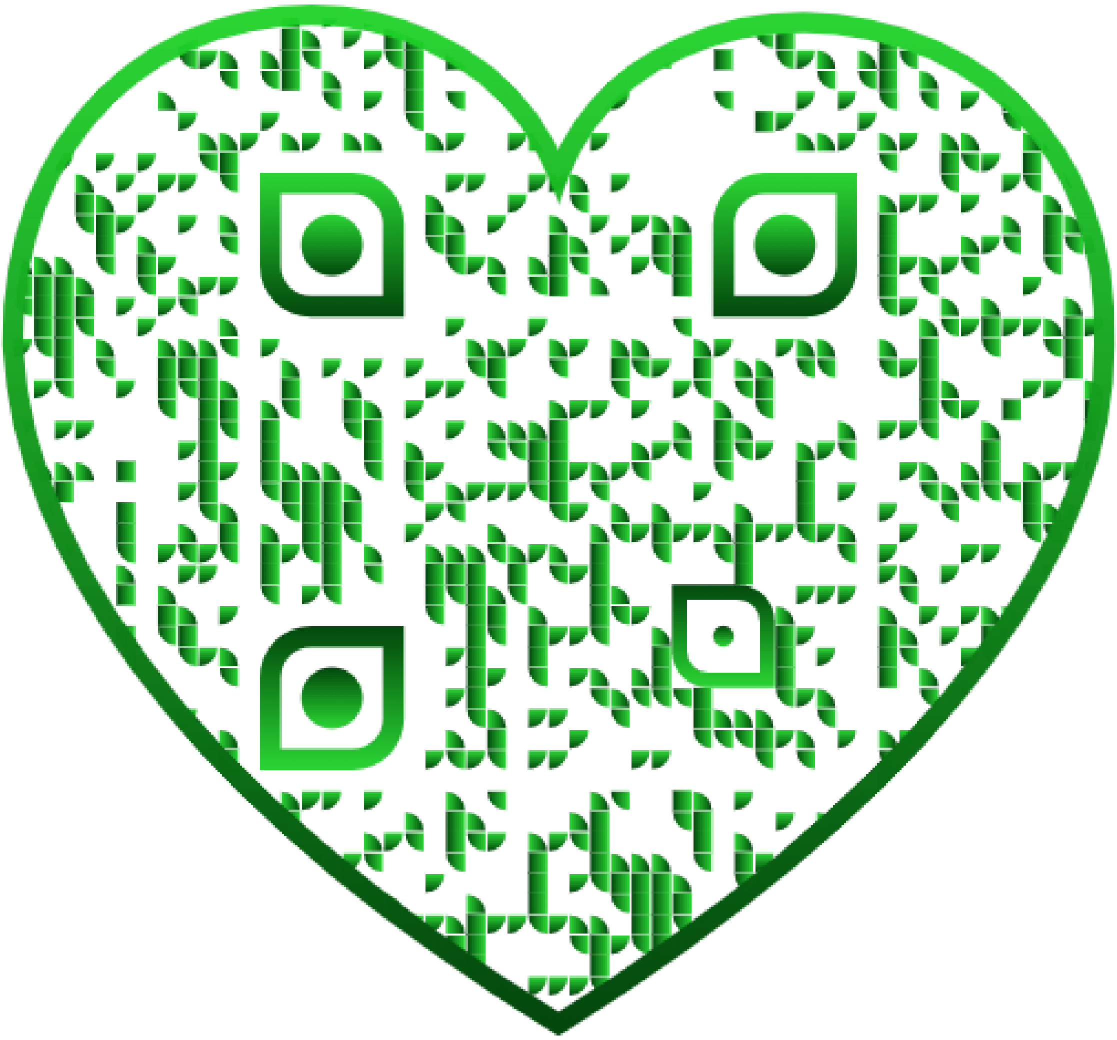

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WELCOME

Nick Rhodes has always struck me as the kind of person who marches very much to the beat of his own drum. "The idea of how *Thank You* was received in 1995 only makes me want to do more covers, not less," he tells *Classic Pop* in our exclusive interview this issue with Duran Duran about new studio LP, *Danse Macabre*.

You've got to admire his confidence. Many bands would have headed for the hills never to be seen again following the critical drubbing that was handed out to *Thank You* back in the mid-90s, but Duran are undoubtedly made of stronger stuff.

With a very loose Halloween theme, their latest album – which was recorded in a scarcely believable blink-and-you'll-miss-it four days – features covers, reworked songs from Duran's own back catalogue as well as all-new material.

Perhaps emboldened by the plaudits that quite rightfully came their way following previous album *Future Past*, Duran Duran seem in a very good place at present. Drummer Roger Taylor tells us he thinks the band have reached "critical mass" and are enjoying a whole new lease of life. We couldn't agree more – *Danse Macabre* really does find them in fine fettle.

Also featured this issue and in equally ebullient form are OMD. Many fans of the synth-pop icons place 2017's *The Punishment Of Luxury* among the top three or four albums ever released by Andy McCluskey and Paul Humphreys, a fact not lost on the duo themselves who were delighted that they'd seemingly rounded off their studio years with an unexpected masterpiece. So the stakes could not have been higher when they reconvened for new album *Bauhaus Staircase*.

Remarkably, they've pulled yet another rabbit out of the hat. Just one glance at the oh-so-OMD tracklisting – yes we're looking at you *Kleptocracy, Anthropocene* and *Veruschka* – and you'll see that Andy and Paul have lost none of their trademark ambition and gravitas.

And speaking of late-career triumphs we just had to stretch our remit a little bit this issue to include the remarkable comeback by The Rolling Stones. What a joy it is to hear Mick'n'Keef having such a ball on *Hackney Diamonds*. If you were expecting more 'Arthritic Fingers' than *Sticky Fingers*, then prepare to have any doubts blown away. There's life in the old dawgs yet.

Enjoy the issue!

Steve Harnell, Editor
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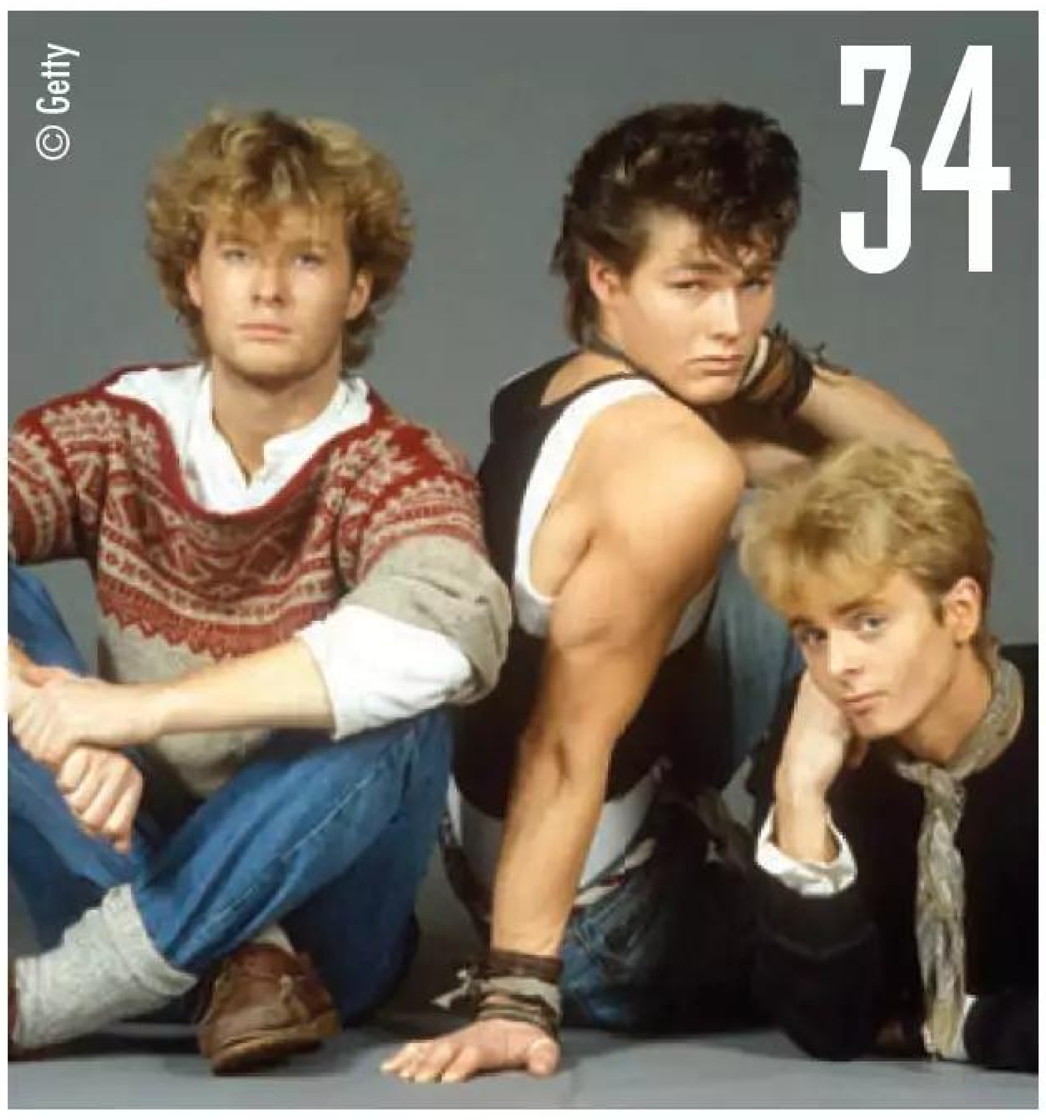

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CLASSIC POP WHO'S WHO

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SOUNDBITES

*1 "A soundtrack cut more than a song perhaps, but synth music at its most sinister."
*2 "Without the *Exorcist* connection, this song probably wouldn't sound as creepy as it does, but if I hear it now I feel like the Devil's in the room."
*3 "The first cassette tape I owned when I was little was *Now 6* and I'd fast-forward this because it gave me the creeps."
*4 "Their best pop moment, a Halloween floorfiller dressed up in brass, percussion and a sensational pronunciation of "Peek". Stunning video, too. Those close-up lips!"
*5 "The combination of disturbing imagery and discordant, lurching music is genuinely nightmarish (in a good way)."
*6 "One of Madonna's best ever B-sides and proof she can always be relied upon to make anything sexy – even the supernatural!"
*7 "Post-punk's finest trick or treat anthem."
*8 "After all, nothing is as scary as a horrifying reality."
*9 "The sound of being haunted by the fact of your own existence."

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The winner of the Best Writer, Specialist category, in 2022's British Society of Magazine Editors Awards, our latest issue sees **John Earls** meet Duran Duran for our exclusive cover feature and catch up with OMD about their new LP, *Bauhaus Staircase*. John also oversees our new albums and reissues reviews sections.

Paul Kirkley makes his living from interviewing famous people with much more interesting and glamorous lives than his own. He is also, to the best of his knowledge, the only paid TV critic for a national supermarket chain. This issue, Paul meets UB40 and hears more about the acrimonious split between the Campbell brothers that refuses to heal.

Steve O'Brien has written for such publications as *The Guardian*, *Radio Times*, *The New Statesman* and *Empire*. For *Classic Pop*, he catches up with Eddy Grant for a wide-ranging interview that takes in his early days with The Equals and 80s chart years. Elsewhere, Steve also sings the praises of DJ Shadow's most *Classic Pop*-friendly album to date, *Action Adventure*.

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The Pets are feeling *Relentless* all over again, 30 years on

Pet Shop Boys have announced a reissue of their much sought-after *Relentless* mini-album.

First released as a bonus disc with 1993's *Very* LP, *Relentless* was also available at the time as a rare standalone vinyl – limited to 500 copies – with the six tracks spread across three 12" singles. Unissued since then, it swiftly became a coveted Pet Shop Boys artefact among fans.

To mark its 30th anniversary, *Relentless* will now be released on 20 October in a variety of formats including a limited yellow vinyl with new artwork, available exclusively via the duo's webstore, as well as on CD and digital.

Pet Shop Boys explain: "This album was an experiment for us 30 years ago with its six new extended dance tracks. We're very proud of it and delighted that it's now getting the standalone release it deserves."

Life-enhancing album and tour from Take That trio

Take That have announced a huge stadium and arena tour for 2024 alongside news of their ninth studio LP, *This Life*, set for release on 24 November. Its lead single, *Windows*, is the group's first original material in more than five years.

This Life On Tour will see the trio – Mark Owen, Gary Barlow and Howard Donald – play a total of 29 dates across 15 cities around the UK and Ireland, joined by support act Olly Murs.

Speaking about the new single, a statement from the band said: "It's been a wonderful experience being back in the studio together making this record. It has that feeling of spreading your wings, letting out the old and bringing in the new. We're incredibly proud of the new album – there's a sense of togetherness, whether that's us coming back together as a band or people wanting connection in their own lives. We're excited for this new chapter."

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HORN'S SOLO LP HAS ECHOES OF THE PAST

Legendary producer Trevor Horn has teamed up with a host of A-list artists for a new solo album that reworks classic hits across a 30-year timeframe from 1982 to 2012.

Among the big names featured on the 11-track *Echoes – Ancient & Modern* are Seal, Iggy Pop, Marc Almond, Rick Astley and Tori Amos plus husband-and-wife team Toyah Willcox and Robert Fripp.

Released on 1 December via Deutsche Grammophon, a first single – Grace Jones' *Slave To The Rhythm* as reimagined by Lady Blackbird – is available now.

Speaking to former Art Of Noise collaborator Paul Morley, Horn discussed how he chose the tracks to rework – and the artists to help him transform those originals. "Finding the right singers was as important as finding the songs, probably more so," he recalls. "It's an album by me, as a kind of auteur. I'm the artist commissioning other artists rather than them hiring me."

As well as producing *Echoes – Ancient & Modern*, which reinvents iconic songs with different vocalists and new orchestral arrangements, Horn also sings backing vocals and plays keyboards, bass and guitar. "Building a feeling into a song is a tricky, intangible thing to do," he offers. "There are lots of technical

© Etienne Gilfillan

and psychological shortcuts to recording a song, but none to actually make it feel real. That remains a studio secret."

Echoes – Ancient & Modern opens in the 21st century with Kendrick Lamar's *Swimming Pools (Drank)*, now given a strings-laden cinematic revamp by Tori Amos. Horn notes: "It sets everything up like it's the beginning of a song cycle."

Elsewhere, a Rick Astley-fronted version of the Yes chart-topper *Owner Of A Lonely Heart* now boasts a new dance groove, Toyah reboots Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Relax*, while Seal takes on Joe Jackson's *Steppin' Out* and Marc Almond tackles Pat Benatar's *Love Is A Battlefield*. From the end of the 80s, we hear Iggy Pop's version of Depeche Mode's game-changing *Personal Jesus*. "Iggy adds another truth to whatever he does," notes Horn, and Trevor supplies lead vocals for the closing track – Roxy Music's *Avalon*: "It's a little like at the end of the show. I'm saying, 'This is me – the producer, the band leader, but also the performer – signing off. For now...'"

Seal and Marc Almond (pictured top) feature on Trevor Horn's *Echoes – Ancient & Modern*

© Al Pereira/Getty

ETERNAL REUNION HITS THE SKIDS AFTER BANDMATES' ROW

A planned reunion tour for 90s girl group Eternal that was set for 2024 has been cancelled due to an alleged difference in views on transgender rights.

Plans were afoot for a full reunion of the fourpiece but Louise Redknapp and Kéllé Bryan have reportedly pulled out after claims bandmates Easther and Vernie Bennett refused to play LGBTQ+ festivals and Pride events over objections that the trans community had "hijacked" Pride. However, Eternal's former manager Denis Ingoldsby has defended Easther and Vernie, claiming their views have been misrepresented and that Louise was "throwing her bandmates under the bus" by pulling out of the tour.

Redknapp took to X (formerly Twitter) to share an image of the LGBTQ+ flag with the message "Always and Forever" along with a red love heart emoji.

Bryan also spoke out on the subject via Instagram: "Opportunities to reunite for an Eternal reunion tour with the girls [have] been discussed many times over the years. As mothers, the right opportunity and timing for all of our schedules have been tricky to arrange. The relationship with our fans and the joy of celebrating our success was, and still is, my motivation," she continued. "My stance and allegiances have always been that I am an advocate for inclusion and equality for all. Thank you for your continued support over three decades. God bless."

If the 2024 reunion had taken place, it would have been the first time that the original Eternal line-up had played together since Redknapp left to start a solo career in 1995. In a statement to the BBC, Louise's publicist Simon Jones said: "A message was sent to the team putting together the Eternal reunion stating that if it was to go ahead, neither Vernie nor Easther would perform at Pride shows or LGBTQ+ festivals. This was because the duo felt that the gay community was being hijacked by the trans community and they do not support this.

"Louise is a huge supporter and ally of the LGBTQ+ community and both herself and Kéllé told the duo they would not work with anyone who held these views and, as such, the reunion as a four would not be going ahead."

Meanwhile, Vernie said in a statement on Instagram: "I am 'Eternally' grateful for the family, friends, and amazing fans who have and continue to support our incredible journey and artistry. I've been blessed to connect with so many diverse and wonderful people from all walks of life during my career. You all have a piece of my heart. Though it is impossible and counterproductive to respond to the overwhelming number of statements and allegations made online recently, I place this moment in God's hands. I truly appreciate all who continue to express love and support for my family and Eternal."

Q+A
LOL TOLHURST

AS A BRAND NEW ALBUM AND SECOND BOOK HIT THE SHELVES, THE CURE'S FORMER DRUMMER TAKES TIME OUT OF HIS PACKED SCHEDULE TO TALK TO *CLASSIC POP*

DAN BIGGANE

California Drumming: Lol Tolhurst and Budgie join forces with producer Garret 'Jacknife' Lee for a concept album made with a wide cast of artists

The Cure's founding member Lol Tolhurst has teamed up with Siouxsie & The Banshees drummer Budgie and celebrated producer Jacknife Lee for a new collaborative album entitled *Los Angeles*. The 13-track LP is a wild trip into the dark heart of contemporary La La Land with guest appearances from the likes of LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy, Primal Scream frontman Bobby Gillespie, Civil Rights avant-gardist Lonnie Holley, Idles' Mark Bowen and The Edge from U2.

Also, seven years since the publication of his memoir, *Cured: The Tale Of Two Imaginary Boys*, Tolhurst has found time to deliver a deep dive into the dark romanticism of Goth music with his second book, *Goth: A History*.

"Things are very busy," he says, "but that's the way the music business seems to work. You have years where nothing happens and then suddenly everything happens at once."

How did the idea of working together with Budgie come about and what did Jacknife Lee bring to the studio?
Budgie was in L.A. on tour with John Grant in 2018 and we met up. We got talking over coffee about how we should work on something and it all developed from there. Initially we did a whole other album with our friend [Bauhaus drummer] Kevin Haskins and Danny Lohner from Nine Inch Nails. It sounded exactly how you would expect it to sound: a bit like The Banshees, a bit like The Cure and a bit like Bauhaus. But it wasn't really what we were after because we didn't want this to be a 'legacy' thing.

I happened to mention to Jacknife that we had made some recordings but weren't sure where we were going with it. After taking a listen, he suggested we just ripped it up and start again. What's good about the way the record turned out is that it's totally organic. People will not expect what they're going to get, but I think if you like The Banshees or The Cure, you'll hear elements of those bands. People will make connections and understand why it's part of the rich tapestry of where we come from.

You have some notable guests. Is it right they contribute their own lyrics?
We originally thought it should be an instrumental album but decided to share it with a few people like James Murphy and Bobby Gillespie. Bobby asked if we had lyrics and was immediately interested. We gave him a rough idea and asked him to write what he felt like. What he came back with made complete sense and we decided to do that with the whole album.

So, is there a running theme on the LP?
L.A. is pivotal to all three of us. When The Banshees and Creatures broke up Budgie spent a lot of time here and it's always been a place where he thought he should be. Jacknife moved here around 10 years ago and built his studio. When I left The Cure my whole life disintegrated and L.A. put me back together again. I found acceptance and this is my home. I've lived here longer than anywhere else in the world and wanted to get that across on the record.

Budgie also provides the foreword to your new book. When did the idea to write *Goth: A History* form?
When I wrote *Cured* I'd never written a full-length

The trio's new long-player is framed as a love letter to their beloved home city of Los Angeles

book, so it was a monumental task. The subsequent book tour was very illuminating because I talked to a lot of people who had experienced that time and how it shaped the world they live in. So, for this book, I wanted to talk about how important that whole musical genre is and why Goth is a way of being in the world. John Robb and Cathi Unsworth have both recently written books about Goth, but what they've done is not the kind of book that I wanted to write. We hadn't colluded or talked to each other, so it's interesting how we all approached the subject in different ways. I'm not a journalist and hate research, it's like doing homework. What I feel I'm good at is weaving stories to paint a bigger picture. I wanted to write about why Goth and that period was important. Once I got that idea, the book came easily to me.

You open the book by saying Joe Strummer and The Clash saved your life. How was punk fundamental to you?
England was dire at the end of the 70s... the whole western world was dire with Thatcher and Reagan in power. Punk was revolution and, after I first saw The Clash, I knew I could be a musician. The Clash gave Robert [Smith] and me permission to believe that we were not trapped forever in our quiet desperation and could kick down some walls.

> "LOS ANGELES IS PIVOTAL TO ALL THREE OF US. WHEN I LEFT THE CURE MY WHOLE LIFE DISINTEGRATED AND L.A. PUT ME BACK TOGETHER AGAIN. I FOUND ACCEPTANCE AND THIS IS MY HOME."

You trace the origins of Goth through your first influences – The Doors, Alice Cooper, Marc Bolan and Bowie. Is being an outsider essential to Goth?
It's essential to life. It's like what Groucho Marx said: 'I don't want to be part of any club that would have me as a member'. I've always wanted to think outside the box and ask why...

The post-punk Goth scene saw you cross paths with other 'Architects of Darkness' such as Joy Division, Bauhaus and The Banshees. What connected The Cure with these bands?
I think we all share similar beliefs. We were all illustrators of the time and the place that we came from. I talked to Kevin Haskins about how Northampton was such a dismal, dark place and how it informed who Bauhaus were. The same goes for The Cure in Crawley, Joy Division's Manchester, and for The Banshees growing up in suburbia on the edge of London.

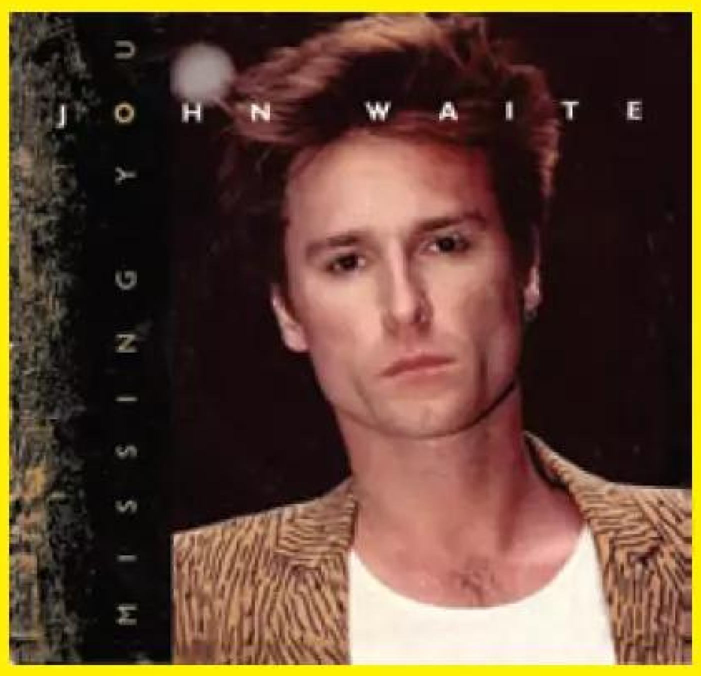
When The Cure joined the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame, they asked us who we wanted to be inducted by. I suggested Trent [Reznor] because I admire him. He was quick to acknowledge how he grew up in Mercer, Pennsylvania, a small US town surrounded by cornfields. The thing that saved him was college radio and bands like The Cure. I see it as I travel around America. In every small town, there's a bunch of Goths waiting to get out into the world. They may not call it 'Goth', but it's the same thing to me.

There is a stark melancholia which permeates through those three early Cure albums, *Seventeen Seconds*, *Faith* and *Pornography*. Aside from geography, where did it come from?
The first record, *Three Imaginary Boys*, was just our live set at the time and us trying to tie all the things together that we understood. When we came to make *Seventeen Seconds*, we told [Fiction Records founder] Chris Parry that we'd like to do it ourselves and channelled our teenage angst through that record. *Faith* came along after Robert's grandmother died and while my mother was dying, so it's reflective of that whole horrible pain we were experiencing. *Pornography* was the explosion after all that and it's my favourite album by The Cure. Everything was falling apart, but the music was perfect. People said our music was depressing, but it was the absolute opposite... It's how we escaped those dark places and Goth people understand this. There's this cartoon version of Goth, which is people with bats sleeping in coffins, but that's like people thinking punk was just spiky hair and bondage pants. Yes, there are elements of that, but I don't want to insult people by saying what total Goth is. I point out at the beginning of the book how The Cure is both the progenitor and antithesis of Goth.

What's next for Lol Tolhurst?
We plan to take the record out on the road for a suitcase tour featuring me, Budgie and maybe a couple of other people. We're also hoping to encourage as many people as possible who appear on the record to play some bigger events. As Budgie also has a book coming out we hope to combine everything with a kind of residency. The power of what we and other people in our generation did and continue to do resonates and is still worthwhile. We're not shuffling off this mortal coil quite yet.

● ***Los Angeles* is released via PIAS on 3 November and reviewed on page 78. *Goth: A History*, published by Hachette, is out now.**

1 HIT WONDER



MISSING YOU
JOHN WAITE

Despite huge successes in the United States with two different bands at either end of the 80s, it was during John Waite's solo career that British record-buyers briefly noticed him.

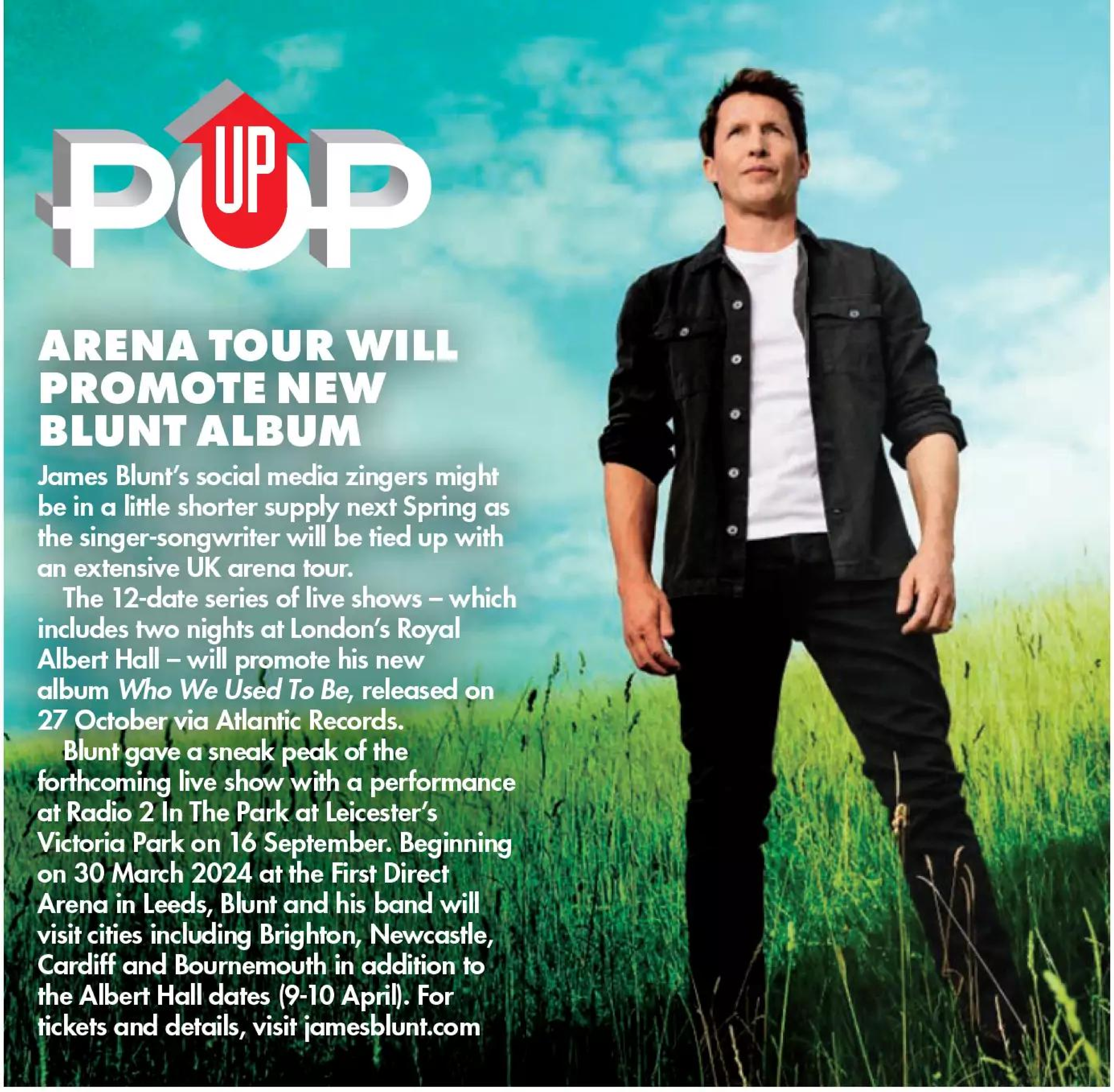
Missing You was a power ballad of denial that the Lancashire-born Waite wrote while going through a divorce and recorded at the last minute for his second solo album, *No Brakes*. Over a lilting guitar track and whispered backing vocals, it managed to be both emotional and a bit of a singalong. Waite delivers the verses calmly and serenely, as if in mediation, authenticating a few lyrical clichés – a message in the wire, frozen heart, telegraph to your soul – before stamping his foot within an excellent, anguished chorus.

Waite lifted the first line ("Every time I think of you") from the title of a single by his first band, The Babys, who had been on the New Wave periphery at the end of the 70s, with eight Billboard Hot 100 hit singles, before splitting up in 1980. Then, in 1989, he scored a No.1 in the States with Bad English, but neither band were successful in his homeland.

In between, *Missing You* made No.9 in 1984 in the UK and had a week at the top of the Billboard Hot 100 in the US. Waite later re-recorded the track as a duet alongside Alison Krauss, while Tina Turner's version was a UK Top 20 hit in 1996.

Matthew Rudd is the host of Forgotten 80s on Absolute 80s

POP UP



ARENA TOUR WILL PROMOTE NEW BLUNT ALBUM

James Blunt's social media zingers might be in a little shorter supply next Spring as the singer-songwriter will be tied up with an extensive UK arena tour.

The 12-date series of live shows – which includes two nights at London's Royal Albert Hall – will promote his new album *Who We Used To Be*, released on 27 October via Atlantic Records.

Blunt gave a sneak peak of the forthcoming live show with a performance at Radio 2 In The Park at Leicester's Victoria Park on 16 September. Beginning on 30 March 2024 at the First Direct Arena in Leeds, Blunt and his band will visit cities including Brighton, Newcastle, Cardiff and Bournemouth in addition to the Albert Hall dates (9-10 April). For tickets and details, visit jamesblunt.com

DEE C. LEE JOGS YOUR MEMORY WITH COMEBACK

© Ben Meadows

Former Style Council vocalist Dee C. Lee has unveiled her double A-side comeback single, which sees the singer renewing links with the Acid Jazz label. *Don't Forget About Love* is Lee's first new music since 1998.

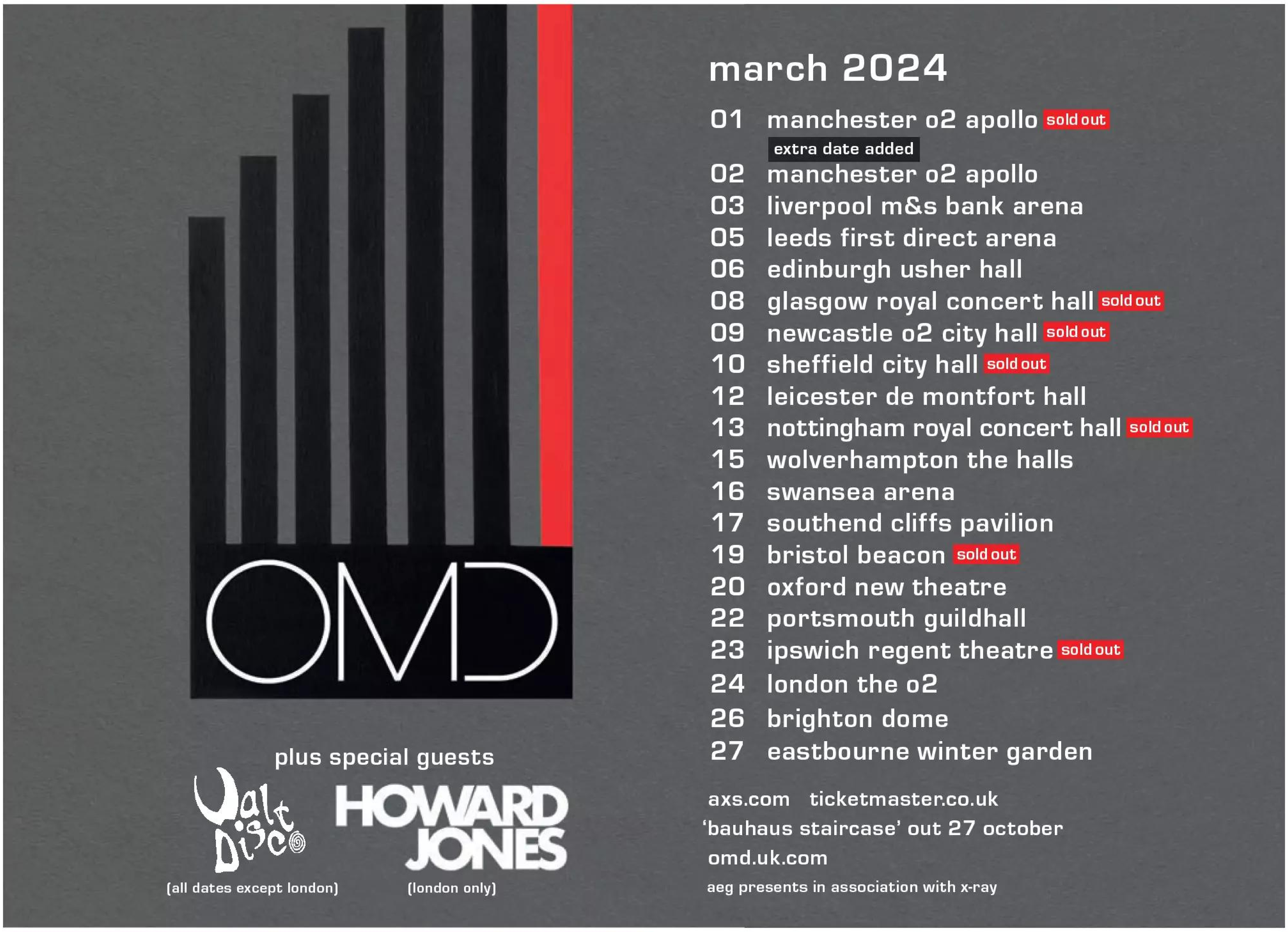
The AA-side's *Be There In The Morning* was originally co-written and recorded by Australian soul singer Renée Geyer and suggested to Lee by Acid Jazz's Eddie Piller.

Lee's relationship with Acid Jazz goes back to her days in The Style Council and the 2019 documentary on the group, *Long Hot Summers*, saw Dee renew her friendship with label founder Piller and ink a new record deal in 2021.

Best known for performing with Wham! and The Style Council, Lee struck out on her own for 1985 solo single *See The Day*, which made No.3 in the UK Singles Chart.

In the 90s, after a career break to have children, Lee teamed up with The Blow Monkeys' Dr Robert and her then husband Paul Weller to form Slam Slam. She also worked with Gang Starr's Guru on *No Time To Play*, a hit from his Jazzmatazz project, and sang on Jamiroquai's *Return Of The Space Cowboy* album.

Dee released two further solo LPs – 1994's *Things Will Be Sweeter* and Smiles four years later – which were recorded for the Japanese market.


OMD
march 2024
01 manchester o2 apollo sold out
extra date added
02 manchester o2 apollo
03 liverpool m&s bank arena
05 leeds first direct arena
06 edinburgh usher hall
08 glasgow royal concert hall sold out
09 newcastle o2 city hall sold out
10 sheffield city hall sold out
12 leicester de montfort hall
13 nottingham royal concert hall sold out
15 wolverhampton the halls
16 swansea arena
17 southend cliffs pavilion
19 bristol beacon sold out
20 oxford new theatre
22 portsmouth guildhall
23 ipswich regent theatre sold out
24 london the o2
26 brighton dome
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LOST & FOUND

CHILDREN
THE MISSION

The long, long, *long* fade-in of the mighty opening track *Beyond The Pale*, with titular children playing in the background, sets the tone for a joyous, hypnotic second album from The Mission, cementing their place at the smoother, darker end of goth rock.

Produced by Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones, the whole recording is impressively polished and professional without conceding any gothic principles whatsoever, thus allowing the musicianship of the band to reach its full potential.

Wayne Hussey's vocal variations on an array of strong songs are admirable – brooding on *Heaven On Earth*, building dramatically on *Kingdom Come* and pleasingly coherent on Aerosmith cover *Dream On*.

The main hit, *Tower Of Strength*, fits all the gothic criteria while also being a fine pop song, *Heat* bangs up the rhythm section effectively and the compatibility of Hussey, backing singers and a harp on curveball effort *Black Mountain Mist* is a delight.

It's a long album – 13 tracks which include two around the eight-minute mark and several more over five minutes.

It therefore requires patient evaluation, but it's worth the effort. *Children* peaked in the UK at its entry position of No.2 in March 1988, held off only by Terence Trent D'Arby, and acquired a gold disc. Hussey and fellow founding members Simon Hinkler and Craig Adams continue to this day, and released their 11th and most recent album in 2016.

Matthew Rudd

POP UP

POP FAVOURITES UNVEIL 2024 TOUR DATES

Kenny Thomas

Pop fans have a whole host of live shows to add to their gig-going diaries for 2024 as a raft of new tours are announced.

Kenny Thomas – also interviewed in this issue on page 18 – heads out on his biggest theatre tour in more than 20 years. The blue-eyed soul star and *Thinking About Your Love* hitmaker said: "Live gigs are one of the most enjoyable aspects of being a musician and it's where my fans come together for a night of soul music and serious partying. So to announce the HIM 2024 tour is really exciting for me and the band. It's also an opportunity for us to play songs from my third album *HIM*, which was never commercially released." Thomas' nine-date UK jaunt sees him visit cities including Edinburgh, York, Bristol and Portsmouth.

Also keeping the soul music flag flying, Imagination's Leee John is marking 40 years of the band with the 10-date Flashback Greatest Hits 2024 Tour. Kicking off at Glasgow's Saint Luke's on 8 May, the tour includes shows at London's Indigo2 on 11 May and concludes at Manchester's RNCM on 19 May. The tour is part of a variety of anniversary celebrations for the singer, which has included the release of the 189-track 17CD *40 Years* boxset. A live album recorded at the Olympia in Paris last year is promised by John, too.

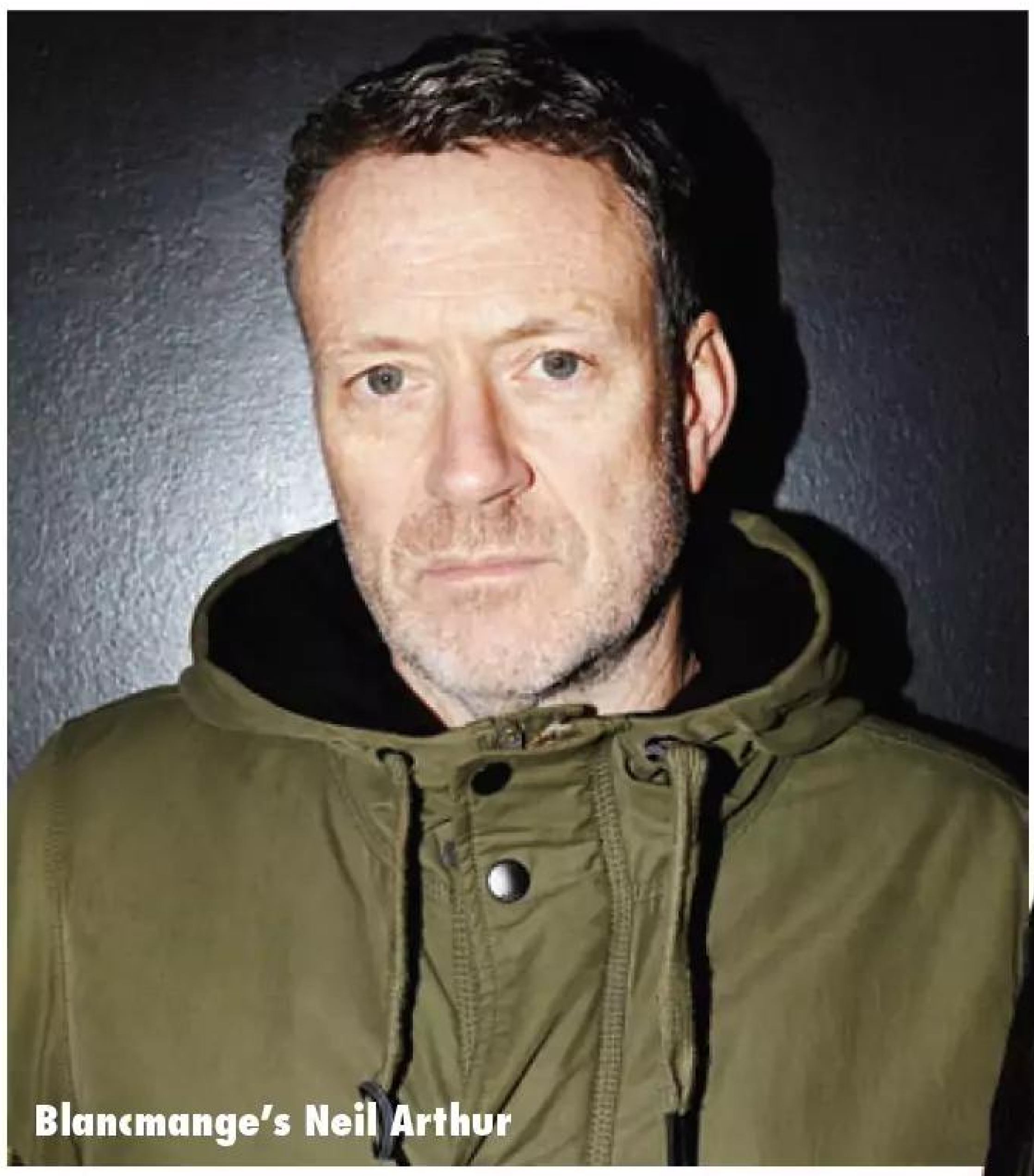
Also in reflective mode are *Classic Pop* favourites Blancmange with Neil Arthur unveiling his first ever Best Of tour in 2024. Beginning in Newcastle on 16 May, the 11-date tour will head to a string of major cities across the UK and include a show at London's Islington Assembly Hall as well as a Scottish date in Glasgow.

Elsewhere, Wet Wet Wet and Go West are joining forces for the much-anticipated co-headlining 12-date Best Of Both Worlds tour, which runs from 21 January to 7 February 2024 and traverses England, Wales and Scotland.

Wet Wet Wet bassist Graeme Clark commented: "This is a first for us, it's our debut co-headline tour and we are super vibed about it. It's always great to be on the road and this will be something special."

The band's new frontman Kevin Simm adds: "Go West are great guys and their hits speak for themselves. Being a vocalist, I've always greatly admired Peter Cox's unique tone and soul so I'm looking forward to hearing it every night on the tour."

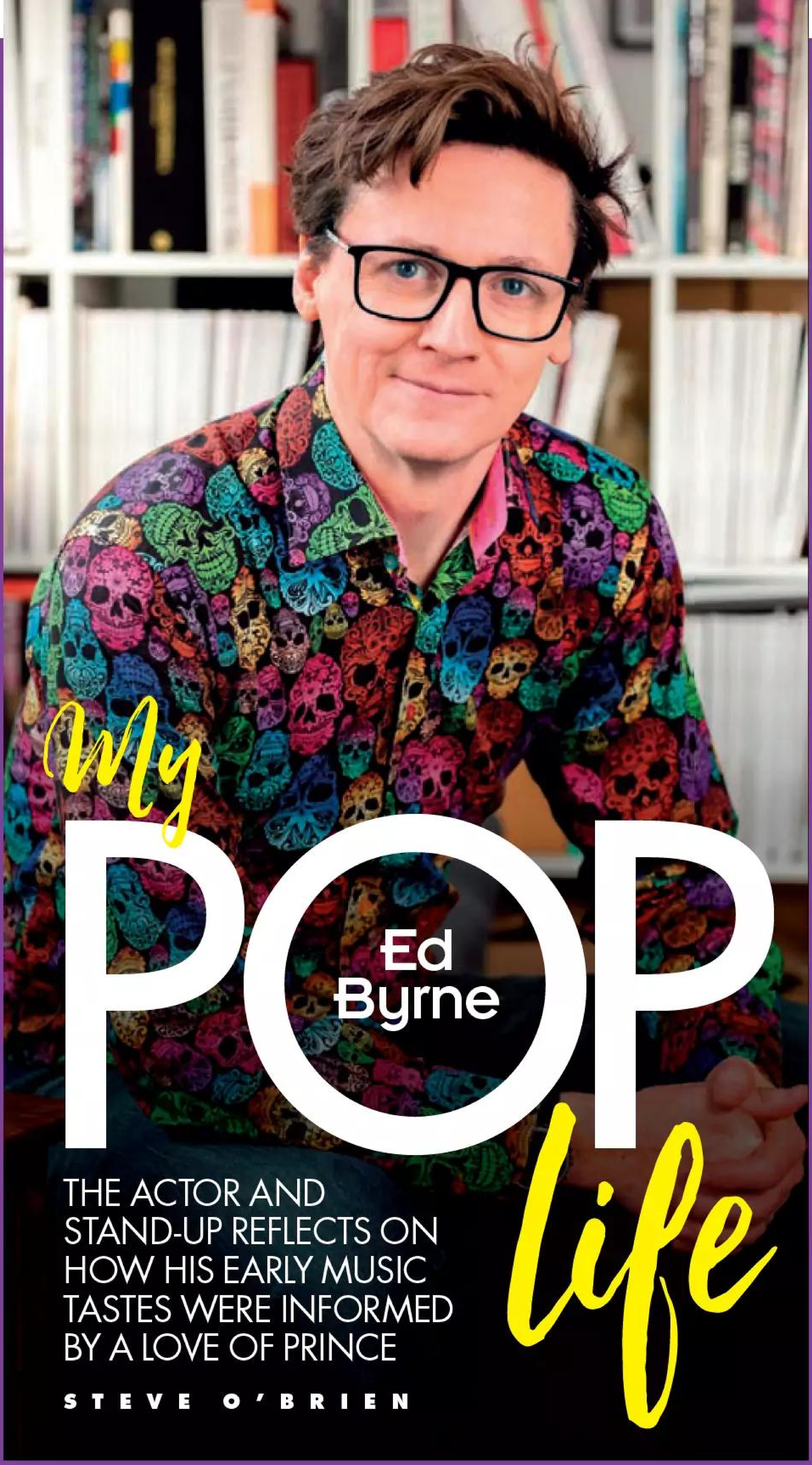
For more details on the shows, visit **ticketmaster.co.uk**


Blancmange's Neil Arthur

Leee John

Wet Wet Wet

Go West's Richard Drummie and Peter Cox



My POP life

Ed Byrne

THE ACTOR AND STAND-UP REFLECTS ON HOW HIS EARLY MUSIC TASTES WERE INFORMED BY A LOVE OF PRINCE

STEVE O'BRIEN

Who were your musical heroes growing up?
Prince. All the way, every day. In the 80s, that was it for me. My sister liked David Bowie and my brother liked Queen and I was informed by their choices, but Prince was my thing. He was my whole identity.

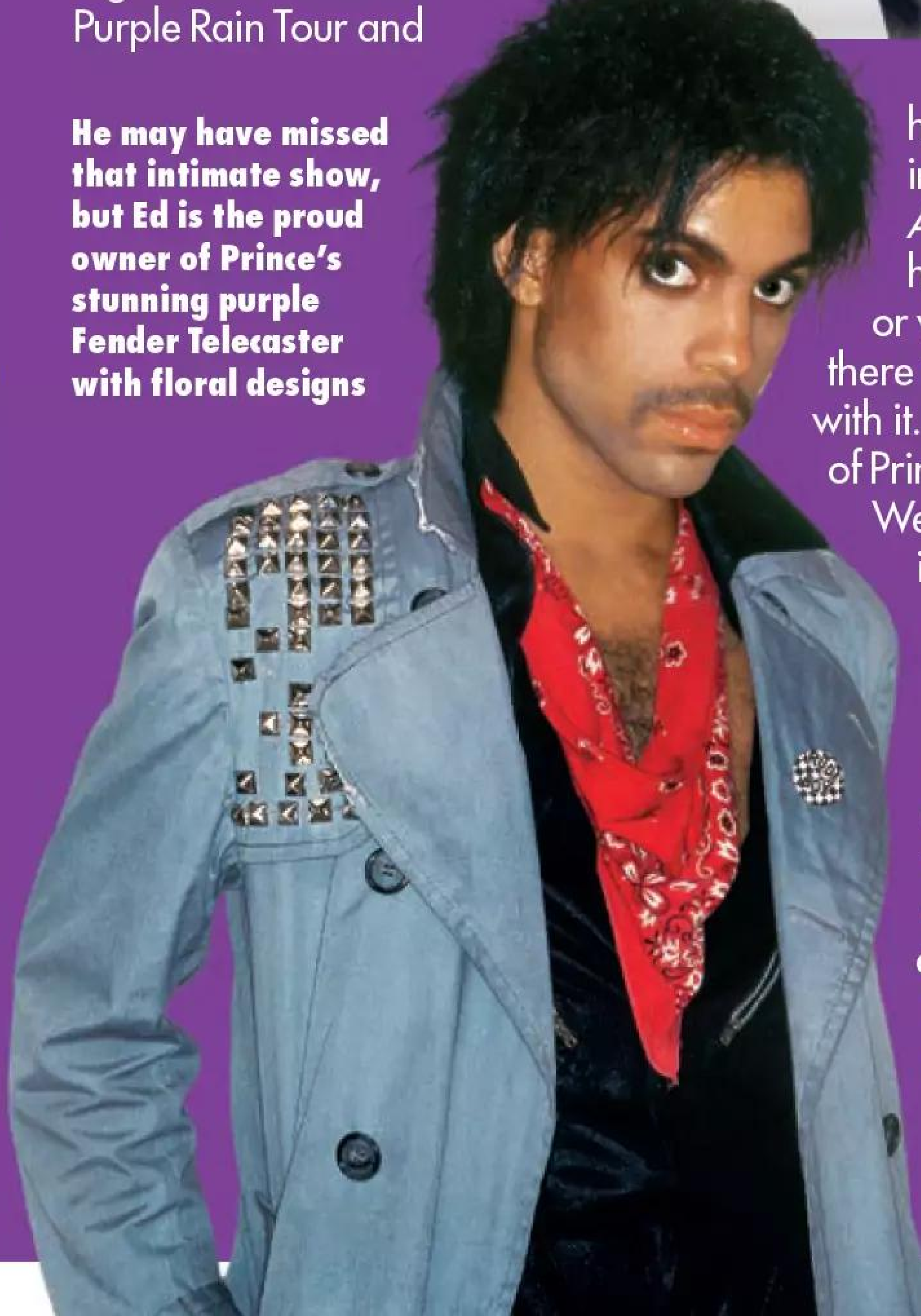
What was the first single that you ever bought?
The 12" of *Let's Go Crazy*. The first single I ever bought that wasn't Prince was *Let's Go All The Way* by Sly Fox. It was a rip-off of *I Am The Walrus*, wasn't it?

What's your all-time favourite album?
I would probably say *Parade*, 'cause it would take me back. But at the time, I had *Around The World In A Day* and *Purple Rain* on either side of a 90-minute tape, and I played that every night when I went to bed. So those two are the albums I've probably listened to the most.

Did you ever manage to see Prince live?
The first time he came to Ireland was in 1999, which was on the Nude Tour – not his best tour by any stretch of the imagination. He didn't play for very long and the audience was terrible. It was the year Ireland had been in the World Cup and at one point he goes into one of his signature funk jams and the fucking audience started chanting *Olé Olé Olé*. I was up at the very front, with all the hardcore Prince fans, and we all just looked at each other, like 'what the fuck is wrong with these people?' When a crowd of Irish people reach critical mass they have to just start singing *Olé Olé Olé*.

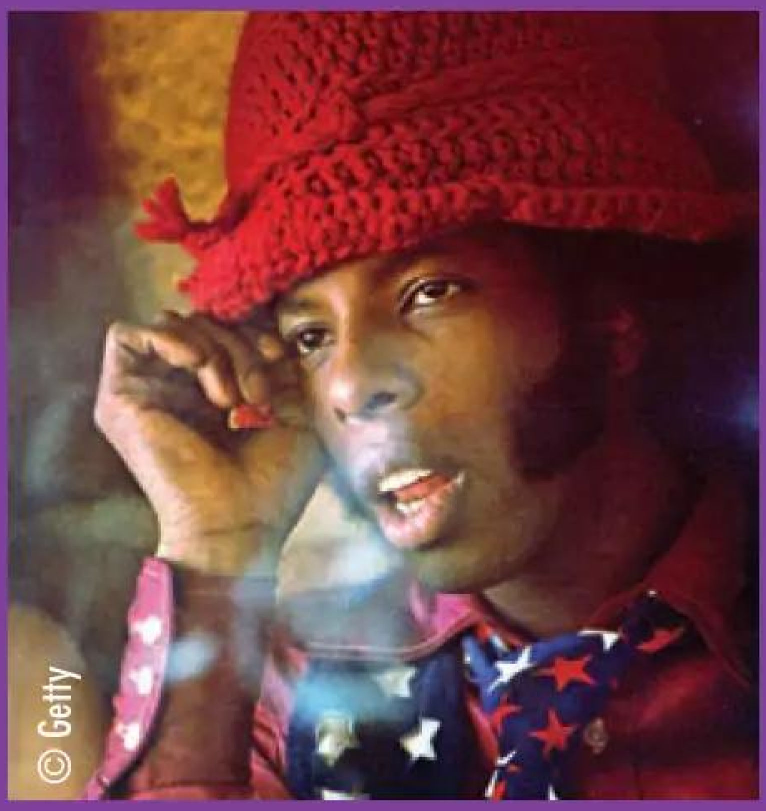
And did you ever get a chance to meet him?
Never. There was once this gig at The Roundhouse or somewhere and everyone who was managed by [comedy talent agency] Off The Kerb got an invite, so people like Dara Ó Briain and others got to go to this really intimate Prince gig that had something to do with raising awareness of autism. But I didn't get to go and I was like, "I'm a bigger Prince fan than any of you!"

Do you have any Prince memorabilia?
I do have a guitar he used to own. I bought it in 2001. It was a guitar made for the Purple Rain Tour and he actually plays it in the video to *America*. Not one of his most iconic songs or videos, I know, but there is footage of him with it. I've also got photos of Prince playing it and Wendy Melvoin playing it, too. It's a very cool guitar. It's in a case on the wall.



He may have missed that intimate show, but Ed is the proud owner of Prince's stunning purple Fender Telecaster with floral designs

Are there any other artists that you're as obsessive about as Prince?
Recently I've shifted my allegiances in the direction of grunge, so I'm a big Pearl Jam fan.



© Getty

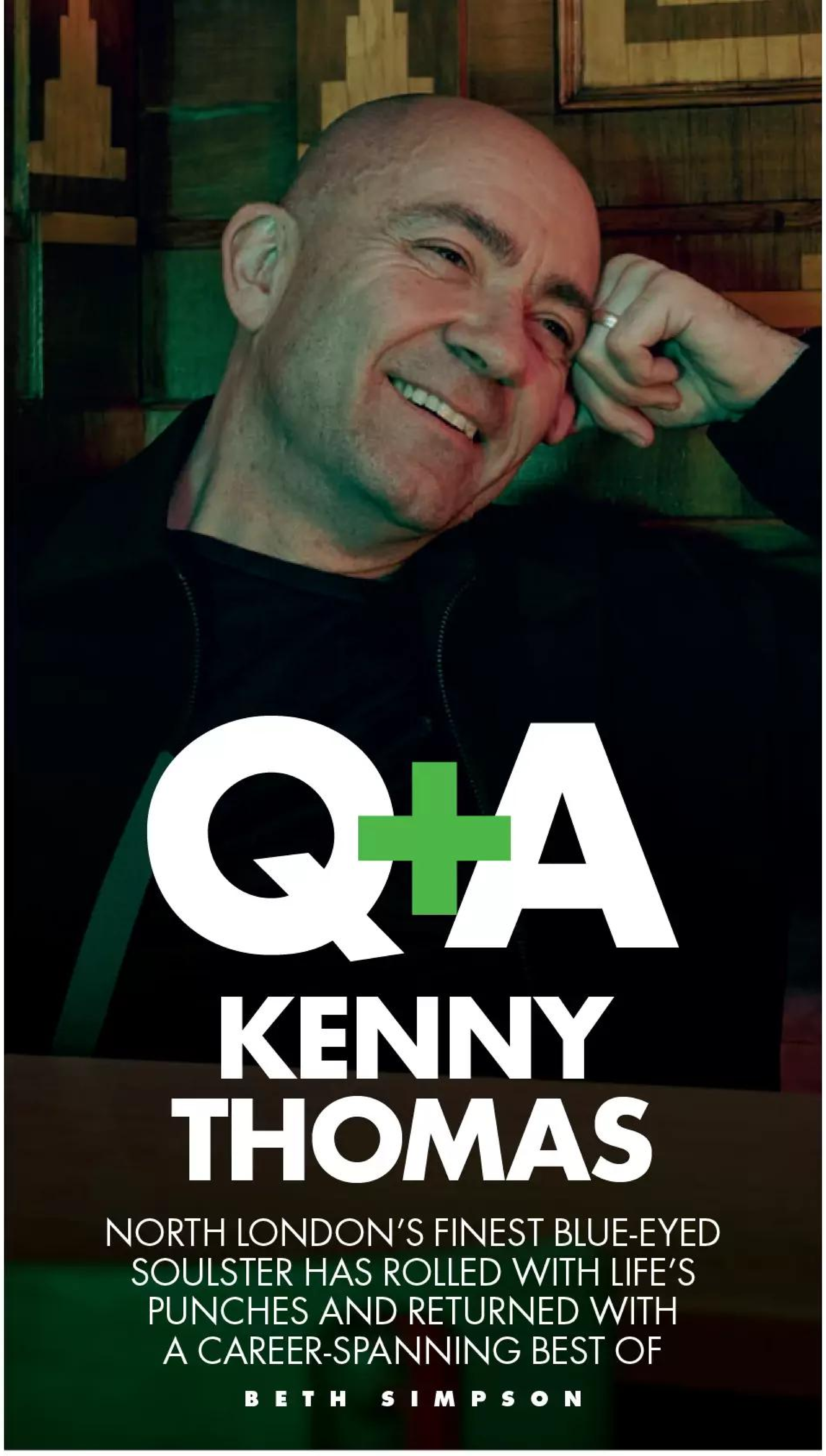
Ed became a fan of Sly Stone and Joni Mitchell via his love of Prince

Very different artists...
Well, Prince was very much someone who could rock with the best. That's another thing about Prince, is that, growing up, he led me to so much other music. I'd check out all of his influences so I listened to a lot of Jimi Hendrix, Sly & The Family Stone and Joni Mitchell. Prince was a massive Joni Mitchell fan.

How do you listen to music now? Are you a vinyl hound or a Spotify-head?
I tried to resist Spotify so much, but it's just the convenience of it. I still buy music if I like it and, if I do, I'll buy it often on vinyl. I've kind of fallen out of love with iTunes. I was making a playlist for my tour 'cause one of the things I quite enjoy is curating the music that people will be listening to as they come in and sit down. Just trying to get it from iTunes into mp3, you can't do that anymore. You can't just convert an iTunes song. Even if you bought it and ripped it to iTunes, like on a CD, it still won't let you do it. It's really inconvenient.

What's on your current tour playlist?
There's a lot of Lizzo, there's some classic rock as well like *Don't Fear The Reaper* by Blue Oyster Cult and *Cult Of Personality* by Living Colour. My walk-on music for this tour is *I Just Want To Celebrate* by Rare Earth. My new show is called *Tragedy Plus Time* and it's all to do with the fact that last year my little brother died. So all of the pre-show music is off his Spotify playlists. Spotify has its issues but being able to access my late brother's music, what he was listening to in the last couple of years, has been incredibly beneficial to me.

● Ed Byrne is currently on tour. For more details, visit edbyrne.com.



Q+A KENNY THOMAS

NORTH LONDON'S FINEST BLUE-EYED SOULSTER HAS ROLLED WITH LIFE'S PUNCHES AND RETURNED WITH A CAREER-SPANNING BEST OF

BETH SIMPSON

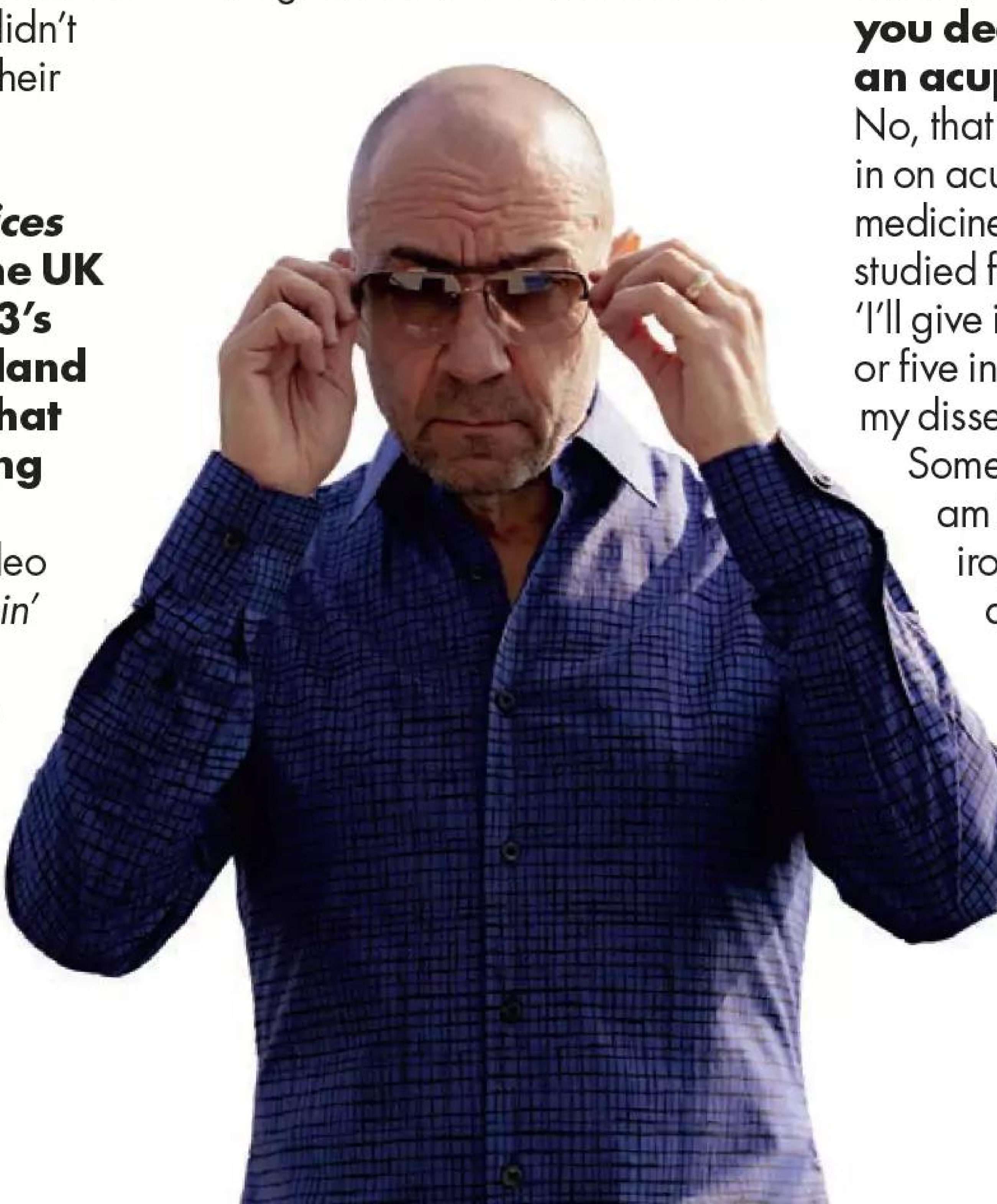
He was the ex-boxer who became the affable face of early 90s pop soul with easy-on-the-ear hits like *Outstanding*, *Thinking About Your Love* and *Best Of You*. But there's a lot more to Kenny Thomas than meets the eye. He tells *Classic Pop* how after getting burnt by the music biz in the mid-90s, he switched careers to become a trained acupuncturist, ended up fronting Living In A Box and how his own daughter's illness has taught him to live in the moment.

You broke through in the early 90s, the peak of the rave era: music not generally known for its soulful qualities. Did it feel as if you were swimming against a musical tide?
I have to correct you on that. Yes, the dance scene exploded around 1989, but at the same time you also had people like Soul II Soul. It was dance music but it wasn't house and it was soulful. I came off the back of that. Probably, I was the last blue-eyed solo artist to hang over into the 90s, but retaining an 80s kind of sound.

Was it your idea to cover *Outstanding* by The Gap Band, which was your breakthrough hit?
No, that would have been a record that I would have left untouched. Remember I knew the soul scene and that was a big record in '86. But my manager at the time did his research. We asked one DJ in particular which record was a guaranteed floorfiller every time and he said *Outstanding*. Recording it was brave – you knew you could get shot down in flames by the real aficionados in the soul world. But that didn't happen. They took it to their hearts and ran with it.

Your first album *Voices* went Top Three in the UK but the second, 1993's *Wait For Me*, didn't land quite as well. Was that down to the changing musical climate?
The problem was the video for the lead single, *Trippin' On Your Love*. It cost loads and in my opinion is one of the worst pop videos ever made. The shows that you need to nudge it up the charts like *The Chart Show* all refused to play it because it was so shoddy.

You rather disappeared after that album. What happened exactly?
We'd started the third album. But then the whole of Cooltempo and Chrysalis was dismantled overnight and nearly everyone lost their jobs. The album got pulled into EMI and came under the direction of their A&R. The long and short of it was I left and had to let the third album go. It's never been released.



Did you feel burnt after that experience?
I felt sad and let down, but there was also a feeling of being liberated. I left my manager, my record company and was on my own. Going through that, I really did discover about who I really was again.

Was it around this time you decided to train to be an acupuncturist?
No, that was much later. I dived in on acupuncture and alternative medicine about 2006-07. I hadn't studied for years and I thought, 'I'll give it a go.' I was up 'til four or five in the morning writing my dissertation and researching. Sometimes you think, 'Why am I doing this?' So the irony of it is when my daughter Christina became ill in 2017 with cancer I've learned why I was meant to do all that. Now I'm armed in a different way to fight for my daughter on a different level to what traditional medicine has to offer. She's now lived 13 times beyond what they originally said she would.

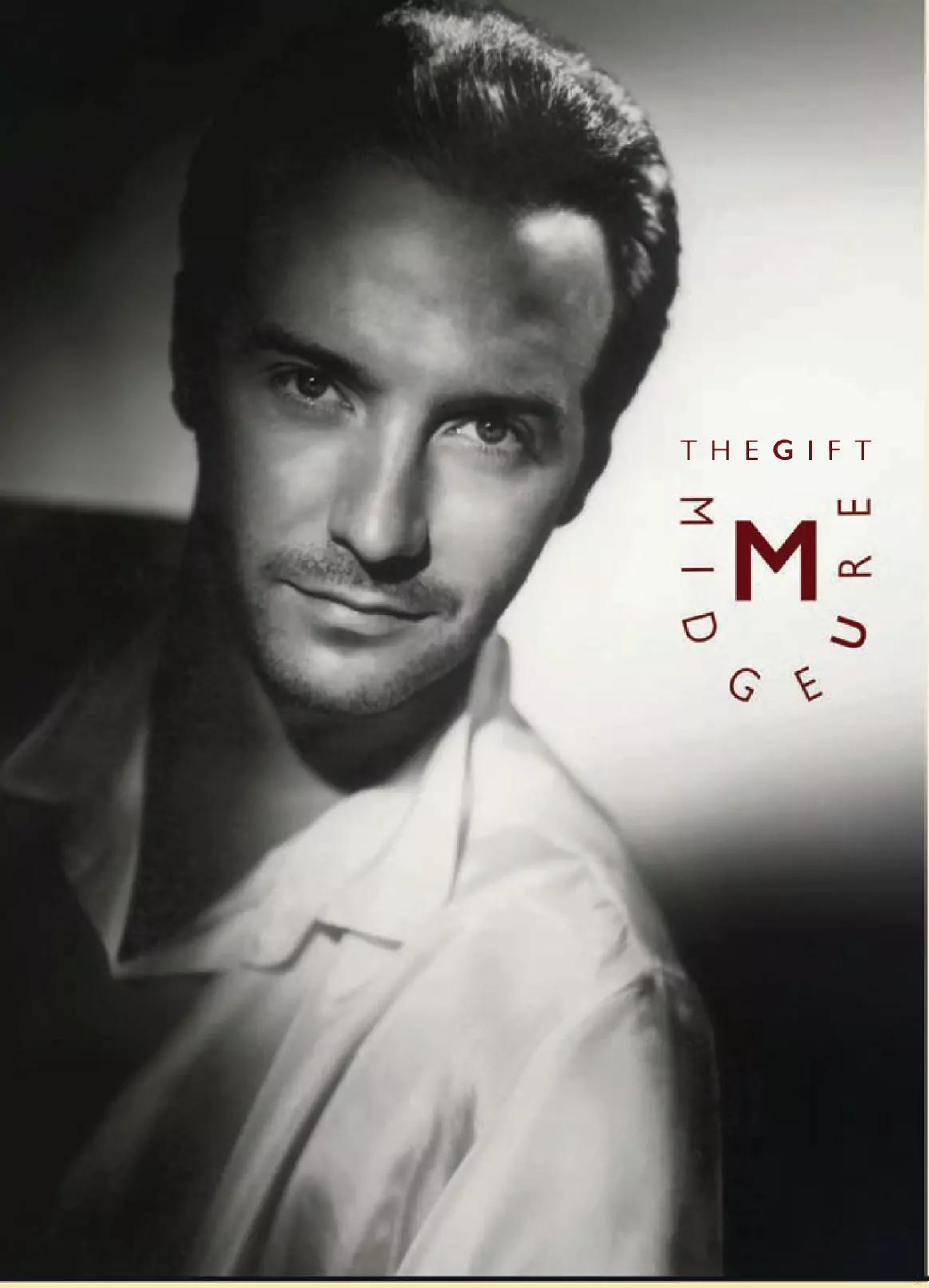
And how is she doing at the moment?
She's here and she's living with a disease as opposed to dying from it, which is probably the best we can ask for. If we had gone down certain routes back then I don't think she'd be here.

You ended up fronting the reformed Living In A Box a few years back – how did that come about?
They're old friends of mine from the days of Chrysalis. Marcus from the band rang me and said, 'Look, Richard Darbyshire doesn't want to do it anymore. We've got some festivals to do and were thinking of you, do you fancy it? I loved some of their songs and they said I could do a couple of my own. It was a lot of fun. It brought me closer to Marcus and Tich in the band and when Christina became ill and we needed to really raise some funds Marcus put together a couple of fundraising events with Tony Hadley, Midge Ure, Kim Wilde and Go West.

What can you tell us about the contents of your new Best Of collection?
The tracks are remastered and there's also some stuff from the third album that never came out. When I left EMI they put together a terrible Best Of with a picture on the front that makes it look like it was taken in primary school. I feel like it's been done properly now.

What are your plans for the future?
I'm currently recording, planning another studio album. People always ask: 'What have you got coming up', but since my daughter's illness in 2017 I tend to live in the present. I have a diary so I know what's going on, but I don't really think much beyond the day that I'm in. ■

● ***The Best Of Kenny Thomas* is released on 3 November via Cooltempo and reviewed on page 90. Kenny's autobiography *Baring My Soul* can be found on Amazon – all proceeds from it go to his daughter's ongoing medical treatment.**
For more information on his latest tour dates, visit kennythomasmusic.com



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IAN PEEL'S A TO Z

POP of POP

B IS FOR… B-SIDES

TO MANY, THEY'RE THROW-AWAY. OTHERS MIGHT NEVER HAVE LISTENED TO THEM AT ALL. BUT ONE OF THE MAIN REASONS POP MUSIC FROM THE 80s HAS ENDURED IS THE B-SIDE.

The fact that the B-side has almost become a genre in itself is ironic because, if it wasn't for the two-sided nature of vinyl records, they would never have existed – or needed to exist – in the first place. Imagine if wax cylinders had endured. They were one-sided, so no need for a flipside.

At the beginning of the 80s, as pop music went into hyperdrive, so did sales of the 7" single. 99p was all it took not only to hear your favourite song from the radio but to own it, forever.

And, if you were lucky, it came wrapped in some of the most groundbreaking artwork and graphic design imaginable.

But let's not overlook the fact that it also came with another side, and another song. One you most certainly would have never heard before. Consequently, you never quite knew what you were going to get on the B-side.

If the first 7" single you ever bought was *All Of My Heart*, ABC's high-drama ballad from *The Lexicon Of Love*, on the B-side you would have got *Overture*, a completely orchestral rendition of the entire *Lexicon* album in miniature.

Or if you bought Adam And The Ants' mainstream crossover blow-up *Antmusic* in 1980, you might have been expecting something Burundi-based and super-commercial on the B-side. But instead, you heard a recording of one of the band's mythical punk exploits from the mid-70s, *Fall-In*. And chances are, like me, instead of being taken aback or put off, it sparked a fascination for the backstory of Adam, the band and how punk music morphed into New Wave.

YOUR FAVOURITE TRACK FROM THE RADIO ALSO CAME WITH ANOTHER SONG. ONE YOU MOST CERTAINLY WOULD NEVER HAVE HEARD BEFORE. CONSEQUENTLY, YOU NEVER KNEW WHAT YOU WERE GOING TO GET.

It wasn't until later that I realised Adam was purposefully re-recording the Ants' early punk work with Marco Pirroni, hence *Physical (You're So)* on the B-side of *Dog Eat Dog* and *Beat My Guest* on the flip of *Stand And Deliver*. Directing the band's new mainstream fanbase to their edgier roots was all part of his plan.

Also spearheaded by the artists themselves, but for different reasons, were the B-sides of Pet Shop Boys. They paired the upbeat disco of *A Man Could Get Arrested* and *That's My Impression* with the downbeat A-sides *West End Girls* and *Love Comes Quickly*.

And when the A-sides were more upbeat – like *Suburbia* and *It's A Sin* – they switched it around and backed them up with dark, mid-tempo crooners like *Jack The Lad* and *You Know Where You Went Wrong*.

It was an alternative version of the Pet Shop Boys. Just like Duran Duran presented an alternative version of themselves with the accompanying *Night Version* mixes on their 12" singles. It proved that, if done right, these parallel universe versions could then be re-presented years later.

As the Pet Shop Boys did with the *Alternative* album in 1995, which followed some classic B-sides compilations that peppered the 80s and early 90s, like XTC's *Beeswax* from 1982, R.E.M.'s *Dead Letter Office* in 1987 and Marillion's *B'Sides Themselves* the following year.

We have the artists to thank, of course, but also the labels, I would say. Not all the labels, because they all had to issue B-sides, they had no choice. The labels we have to thank are the ones that sat with their artists and asked, "So what's the plan for the B-sides?" As opposed to getting up to the release date and phoning them up with: "Quick, have you got anything we can put on the other side?!"

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THIS MONTH IN

POP

NOVEMBER 1989

MORRISSEY ATTEMPTS TO CONTACT THE SPIRIT WORLD AND MADCHESTER TAKES OVER *TOP OF THE POPS*

STEVE O'BRIEN

Images © Getty

6 Siouxsie And The Banshees spin-off group The Creatures release their second album, *Boomerang*, to critical acclaim, if not commercial success.

7 Hip-hop innovator Queen Latifah releases her debut album, *All Hail The Queen*. In 2023, the record was selected for preservation in the United States National Recording Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".

8 American singer and songwriter Solána Imani Rowe, known professionally as SZA, is born in St Louis, Missouri. She's best known for her 2017 LP *Ctrl*, which remains the second longest-charting R&B album by a woman in the history of the US Billboard 200 (behind Rihanna's *Anti*).

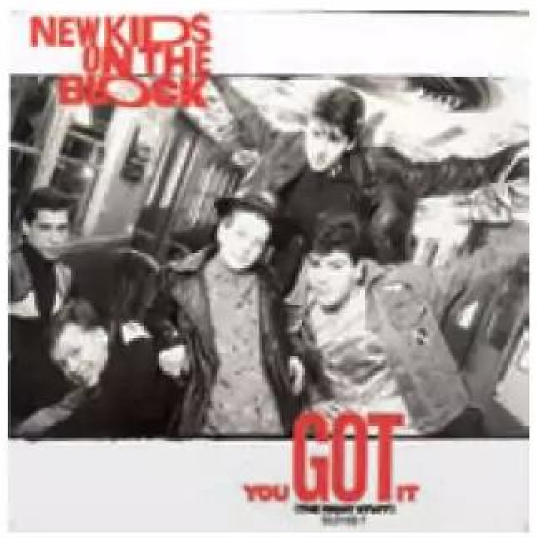
10 The actor Taron Egerton is born in Birkenhead, Merseyside. In 2019 he would win plaudits for his portrayal of Elton John in the award-winning *Rocketman* film.

11 Chris Rea finishes the first week of a three-week run at No.1 on the UK Albums Chart with his 10th LP, *The Road To Hell*.

13 Morrissey releases *Ouija Board, Ouija Board*, from his compilation album *Bona Drag*. It would peak at No.18, making it the first of his solo singles not to reach the UK Top 10.

13 The final album by Felt (featuring later Primal Scream keyboardist Martin Duffy), *Me And A Monkey On The Moon*, is released via él Records. After the band's split, singer and songwriter Lawrence would form Denim.

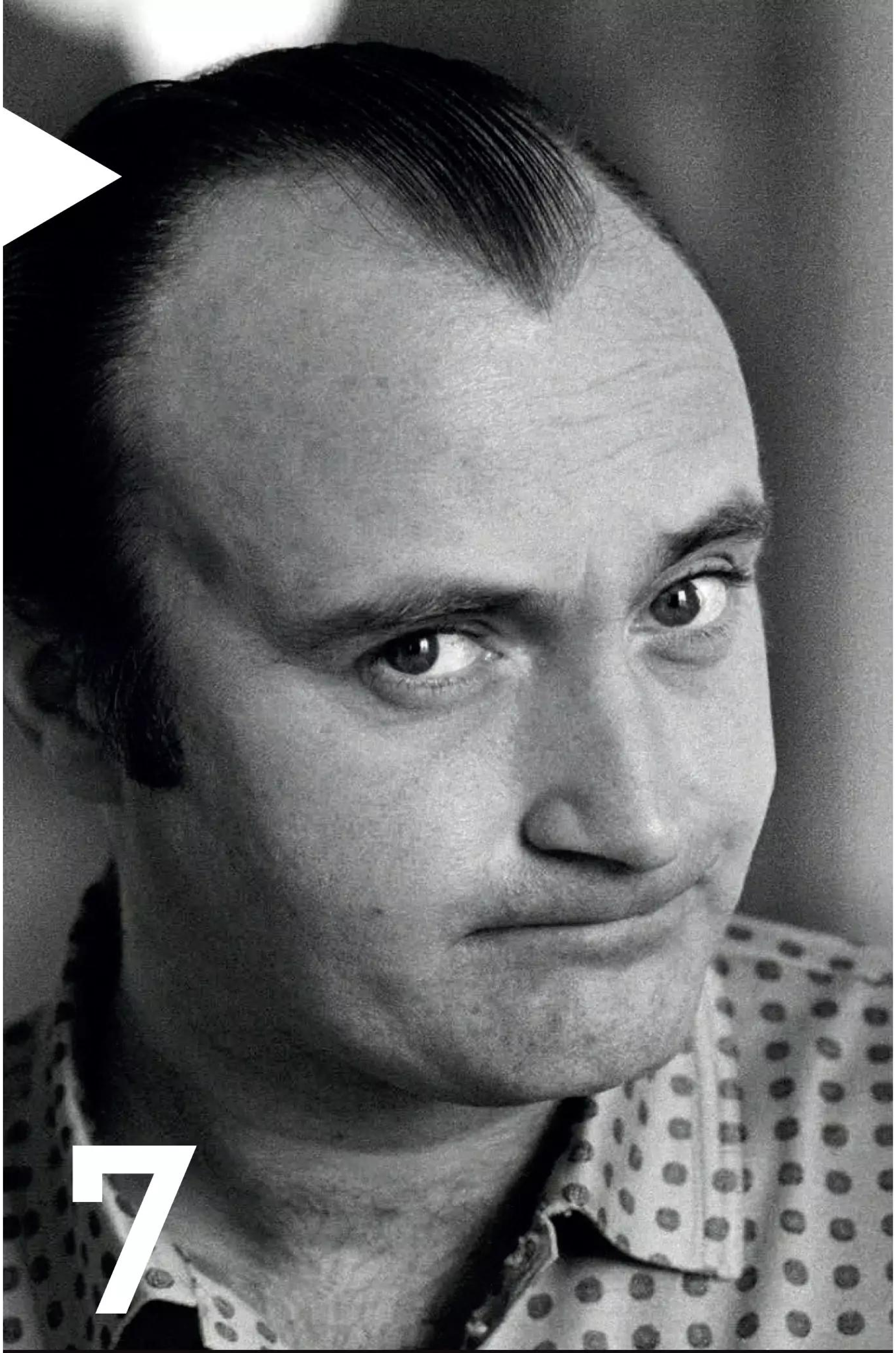
19 New Kids On The Block hit No.1 in the UK with *You Got It (The Right Stuff)*. Their first British hit, the song was spun from the group's second studio album, *Hangin' Tough*.



23 The Happy Mondays and fellow Mancunians The Stone Roses make their debuts on *Top Of The Pops*. The Mondays perform *Hallelujah* and the Roses their No.8 hit, *Fools Gold*.

27 UB40 release *Labour Of Love II*, their second album of covers. The LP includes songs made famous by Al Green, The Temptations, The Chi-Lites and Byron Lee.

28 Belgian dance act Technotronic release their debut LP, *Pump Up The Jam*. The album was preceded by the single of the same name which peaked at No.2 in the UK.



7

Phil Collins released his fourth solo album, *...But Seriously*, on 7 November 1989. Hopes were high for this one, with 1985's *No Jacket Required* having hit the top spot in multiple countries. For Collins, and indeed for the Virgin label, it didn't disappoint, becoming the best-selling album of 1990 in the UK, eventually shifting 2.75 million copies (and four million in the United States).

Recorded between April and October 1989 at The Farm in Chiddingfold, Surrey, and A&M Studios in Los Angeles, it was produced by Collins and Hugh Padgham, who had worked on all of the singer's previous solo albums.

As the title suggested, the record was a move away from the lighter, more dance-oriented vibe of *No Jacket Required* (he'd toyed with calling it *Serious Business*), taking on such topics as The Troubles (*That's Just The Way It Is*), apartheid (*Colours*) and homelessness (*Another Day In Paradise*).

In the UK, *....But Seriously* spent 15 non-consecutive weeks at No.1, and at the end of 1989 became the third best-selling album of the year after just six weeks on sale. *Another Day In Paradise* would win Record Of The Year at the 1991 Grammys, with the LP nominated for Album Of The Year, Producer Of The Year (Non-Classical) and Best Engineered Recording – Non-Classical.

In 2016, the album was remastered with additional studio, live and demo tracks, and an updated cover image, with a by-then-65-year-old Collins recreating that iconic 1989 shot.

TOP 5 UK ALBUMS CHART

12 NOVEMBER 1989

1 **THE ROAD TO HELL**
CHRIS REA

2 **ENJOY YOURSELF**
KYLIE MINOGUE

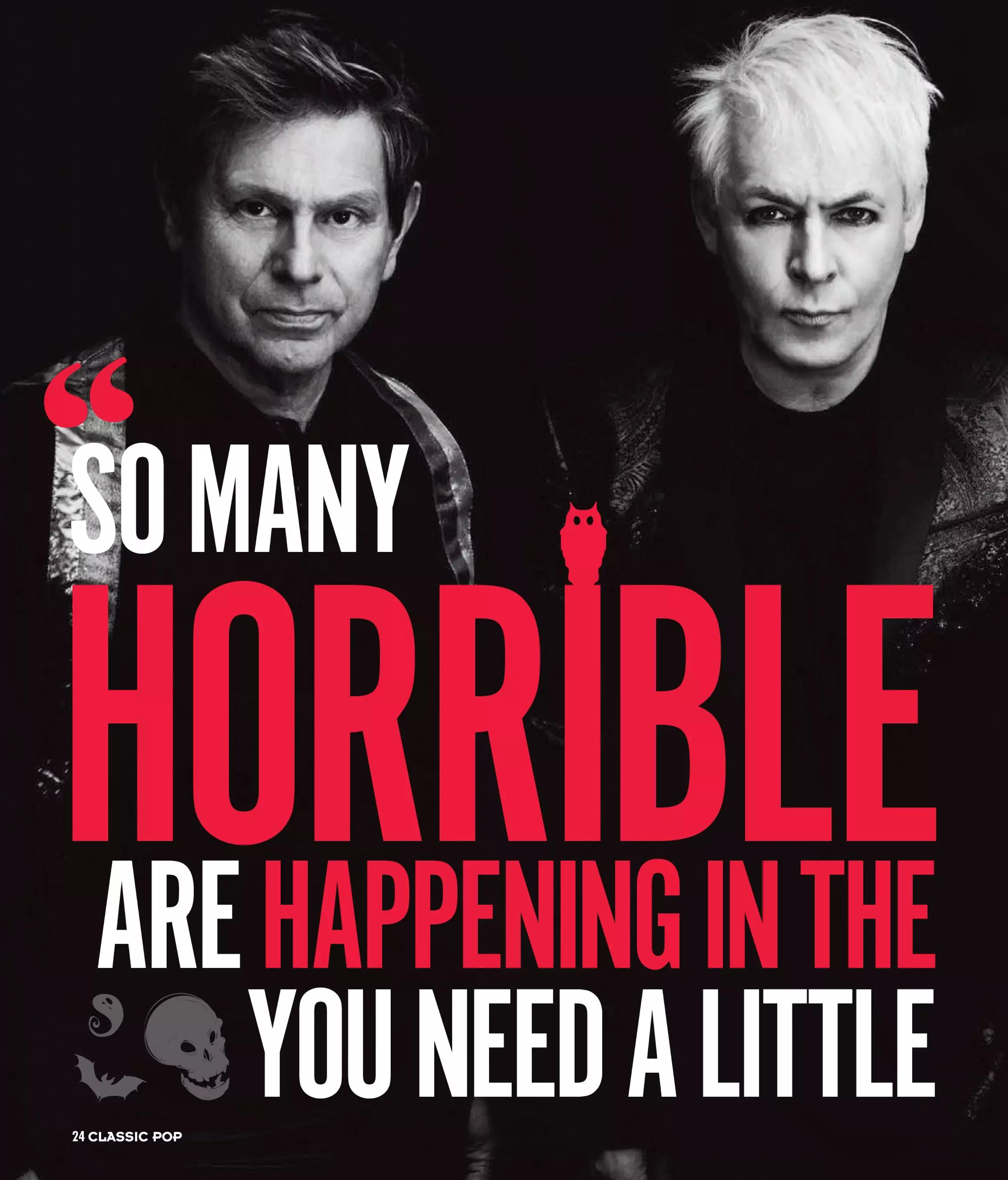
3 **JOURNEYMAN**
ERIC CLAPTON

4 **GREATEST HITS**
BILLY OCEAN

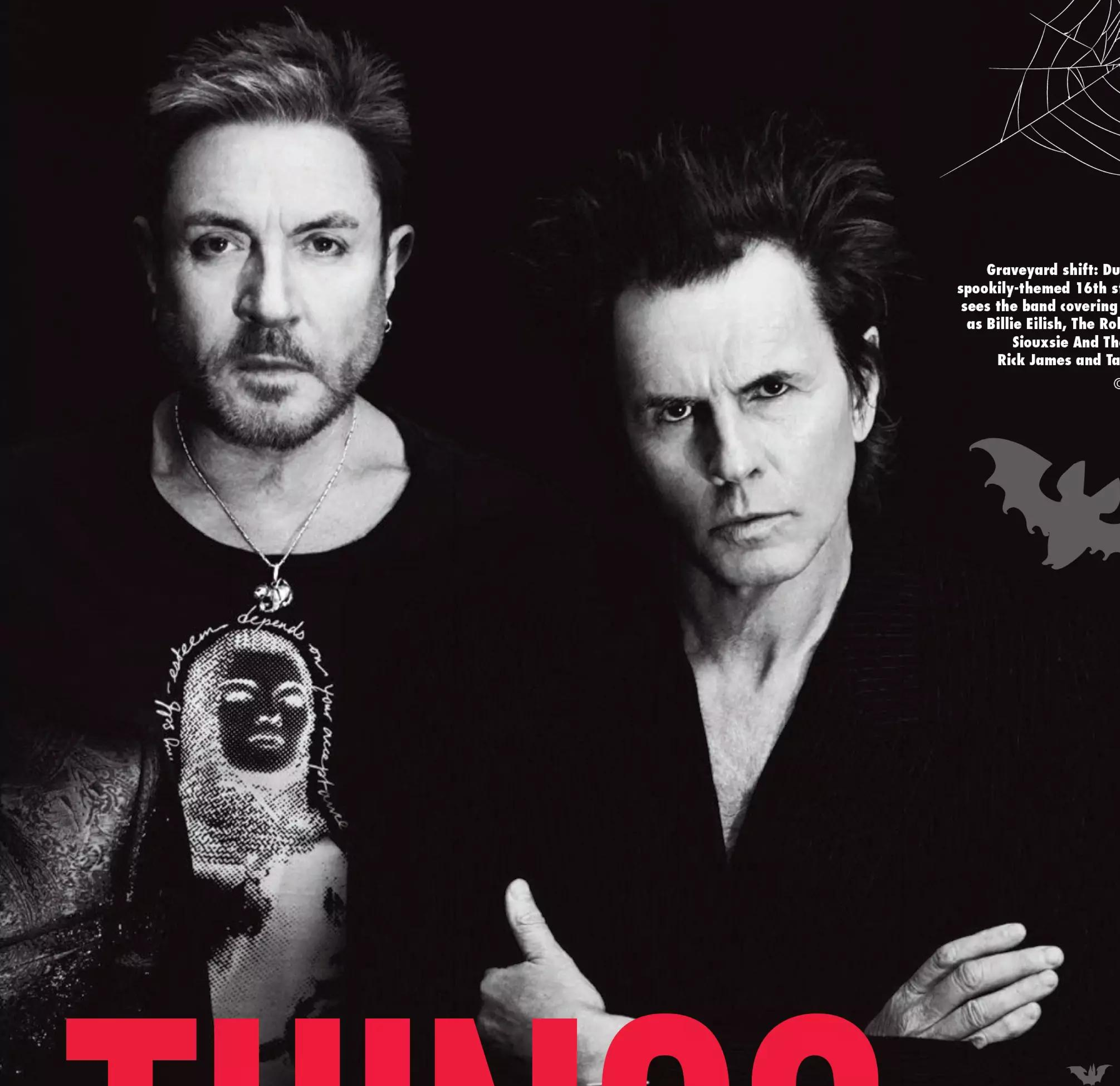
5 **LEVEL BEST**
LEVEL 42

WHAT BEGAN AS A KNOCKABOUT WAY TO TAKE THE PRESSURE OFF BEING INDUCTED INTO THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME HAS BECOME DURAN DURAN'S QUICKEST ALBUM SINCE THEIR DEBUT. FAR MORE THAN A SIMPLE HALLOWEEN-THEMED COVERS RECORD, *DANSE MACABRE* ALSO REINVENTS OLD DURAN FAVOURITES AND HAS THREE STUNNING NEW TUNES, TOO. IN THE EXCLUSIVE STORY BEHIND STUDIO LP 16, THE BAND TELL *CLASSIC POP*: "TYPICALLY, WE LABOUR OVER ALBUMS. THIS FELL INTO PLACE VERY EASILY."

JOHN EARLS



"SO MANY HORRIBLE ARE HAPPENING IN THE YOU NEED A LITTLE



Graveyard shift: Duran Duran's spooky-themed 16th studio album sees the band covering artists such as Billie Eilish, The Rolling Stones, Siouxsie And The Banshees, Rick James and Talking Heads

© Stephanie Pistel

THINGS WORLD, LEVITY,"

It's nearly midnight on a Sunday evening and Simon Le Bon is doing an impression of a foghorn. "HARRNK. HARRRRNNNKKK!" No, he's not reviving an ancient beef with Tony 'Foghorn' Hadley of Spandau Ballet. Go to your room for even thinking such slurs. Instead, Simon is gleefully trying to recapture the noise of the sinister rhythm that drives the title track of Duran Duran's new album.

If it sounds like an ancient aquatic blast from the depths of the sea underpins *Danse Macabre*, that's because that's precisely what it is. "It's the old foghorn at Whitby," burbles Le Bon happily. He's one of life's great enthusiasts, Simon Le Bon. When he's describing any of his passions, whether it's obscure new prog-rock bands or vintage maritime sea defences, he speaks at 100mph and would love you to join in. "We found a recording in the BBC archives of the foghorn,

Danse Macabre features guest appearances from Chic legend Nile Rodgers, Måneskin's Victoria De Angelis and Mr. Hudson

SÉANCE MACABRE

The wild cover art of *Danse Macabre* depicts a séance in London in the late 1940s, with a primitive version of Photoshop showing one of the participants being possessed. Nick Rhodes bought the photo in question at auction, after a friend spotted it in an auction catalogue. "Most of the auction lot was of undeveloped negatives," explains Nick. "That was very intriguing in itself: what else is on there?

"A lot of the photos were on glass plates, including the cover shot. Looking at the auction catalogue, I immediately thought: 'That would make a great cover.' The whole series of photos is extraordinary – I'd love to make a book of them one day. The levels the photographers went to in trying to make the fakery look convincing is just remarkable. There's something so authentic about that fakery, weirdly: if you tried to recreate it now, it wouldn't feel the same."

***Danse Macabre* is from a list of Halloween-related titles Nick scribbled down. "It was always my favourite," he smiles. "There's something about the 's' in *Danse* that I love. John wasn't convinced at first, but he called me a few weeks later to say that he liked it, too."**

What were the other titles on Nick's shortlist? "One was *Memento Mori*. This was several months before Depeche Mode announced it as their album title. It's a great title, an amazing Latin phrase. Depeche were obviously thinking in the same direction. They couldn't have seen my shortlist. At least, I don't think they did!"

which is called the Hawsker Mad Bull. It looks like a house, and it's got *enormous* trumpets either side of it that bend round to face the sea. Go and have a look at a photo, you'll *love* it. That's what the foghorn sound is on *Danse Macabre*. HARRNK. HARRRRNNNKK!"

Alongside his infectious determination to sweep you up into sharing his enthusiasms, Simon Le Bon is one of the most downright onomatopoeic people *Classic Pop* has ever met. Most international pop icons would rather be thrashed with twigs than sing, away from the comfort of the stage. Anyone lucky enough to interview Simon could flog a one-off album for a fortune on the shadier side of online collector sites, based on whatever he happens to sing in interviews that day. Today? Canned Heat, Dusty Springfield, Billie Eilish and The Beatles. In addition to songs, he'll happily explain himself by all manner of percussive effects to his interviewers. "The Hawsker Mad Bull foghorn isn't used now," he sighs. "That's sad, but at least we've put it on a record for posterity. We've paid for its use, it's all legit."

Even by his standards, Le Bon is full of enthusiasm and mischief as he chats to *CP*. He and wife Yasmin have just checked into their hotel in Toronto, the night before Duran's show at the city's Scotiabank Arena. We speak to Roger Taylor over Zoom from his hotel in Washington DC, with Nick Rhodes and John Taylor joining us the day before a show in Boston. John is waiting to meet a friend to go round Boston's John F Kennedy Library. Nick? "I'm going to visit a statue of Edgar Allan Poe after I've spoken to you." Because *of course* that's what Nick Rhodes does after an interview. Synth-pop's ongoing human art project would hardly be "Maybe grabbing some lunch," now would he?

If all of Duran Duran are present and correct, behaving impeccably in character, there's one very significant difference about the band since we last spoke to them just before their wondrous anniversary album *Future Past* was delivered. Less than two years after *Future Past*, Duran Duran have made another new LP, in near record time. Neither covers album, remix project or all-new hoopla, *Danse Macabre* is a heady combination of all three ideas, driven by a loose Halloween theme.

"At this point, we can do whatever we want," smiles Rhodes. "This record makes us smile. It's recaptured our sense of fun." Duran Duran, you may have noticed, spent a great deal of their first few years together having a *tremendous*

Duran Duran transform Billie Eilish's *Bury A Friend* on the new album, *Danse Macabre*

amount of fun. Making the life of initially unlikely global pop stars seem as if they were having as much fun as initially unlikely global pop stars should be having didn't go do well with some of their more earnest 80s peers. "When we started, we could have gone out there and waved flags like a lot of other post-punk bands," concedes Nick.

> "THIS RECORD MAKES US SMILE. IT'S RECAPTURED OUR SENSE OF FUN.
>
> NICK RHODES

"But, instead of standing in the quagmire complaining about it, we decided to get out of it and try to drag other people out of it with us. Our place was to lift people's spirits and sometimes take a look on the lighter side."

ART OF DARKNESS

Danse Macabre, for all that it celebrates, well, the macabre, is a very funny album. "If everything is darkness, the world can be pretty miserable," reasons Rhodes. "So many horrible things are happening in the world, you need a little levity. This album is darkly funny, which makes us all happy.

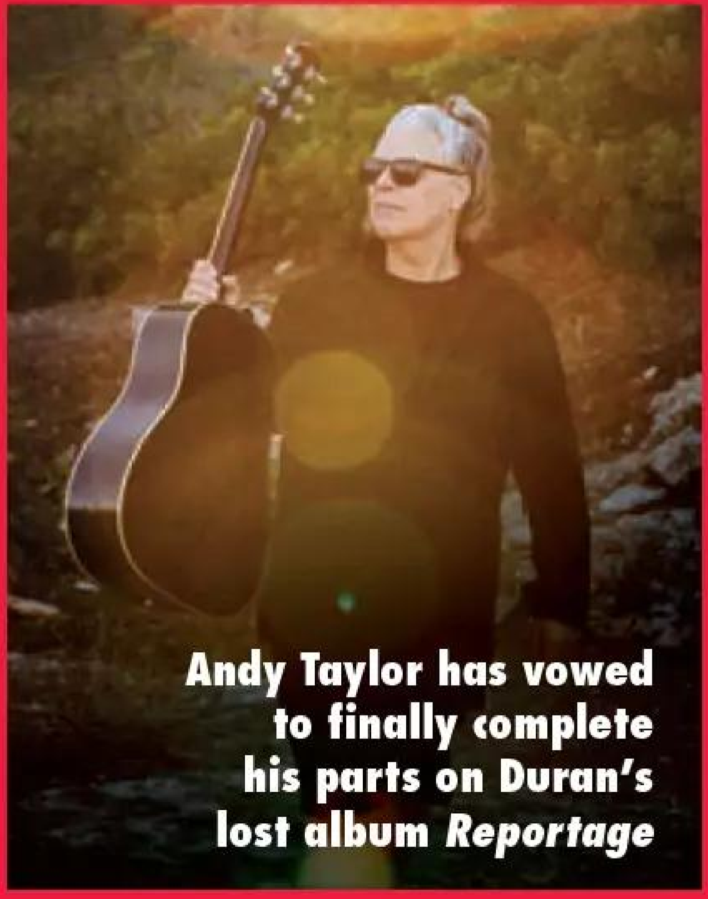
"At the very heart of Duran Duran, what drives us is trying to make each other laugh when we get together."

"I was brought up on the tradition of Bonfire Night," admits Roger Taylor. "But I prefer

"What drives us is trying to make each other laugh," says Nick Rhodes of their "darkly funny" new album

The new album features Duran guitarists past and present from Andy Taylor and Warren Cuccurullo through to tour band member, Dom Brown

THEIR GAME IS RIO



Andy Taylor has vowed to finally complete his parts on Duran's lost album *Reportage*

During the promotion of his new solo album *Man's A Wolf To Man*, Andy Taylor said he didn't want to rejoin Duran Duran on a full-time basis – but he'd love to do a tour with them to play their first two albums from start to finish, *Duran Duran* and *Rio*.

"Never say never," considers Nick Rhodes. "As a guitarist, Andy's contribution to Duran Duran was enormous for two five-year periods. The idea of playing *Rio* in full has come up a dozen times in the band. The last time, I said: 'Let's pick the most unusual venue and do all of *Rio* as the encore.' We just haven't got round to it."

As a fan himself, Rhodes is aware why such a tour would be rapturously received. When David Bowie curated the Meltdown festival at London's Royal Festival Hall in 2002, Nick was among the fortunate 2,700 fans who saw *Low* performed in full, alongside his new album, *Heathen*. "That was an extraordinary, special show," rhapsodises Rhodes. "So was seeing Pink Floyd do *The Dark Side Of The Moon*. There's definitely a case to be made by fans of our first two albums for such a show."

Andy also told *Classic Pop* that he'd be up for finishing his guitar parts on Duran's legendary unreleased album, *Reportage*. "I was glad to hear that," acknowledges Nick. "We all want *Reportage* to come out. It was a different album for us. It's more political than anything we've done, a snapshot of what we felt about life at the time. It's quite a dark record, though there are a few uplifting moments."

"ON *DANSE MACABRE* YOU CAN REALLY SEE BEHIND THE CURTAIN OF WHO THE WHOLE BAND IS

JOHN TAYLOR

Duran's 1995 album of covers, *Thank You*, made No.12 in the UK

Halloween. It's more interesting. It's why as a nation, Britain is slowly edging towards Halloween rather than Guy Fawkes. I've certainly always had a Halloween side to me. I mean, of course I have: you have to like dressing up to be a member of Duran Duran."

Danse Macabre soon emerged from Nick's idea to do a one-off Halloween-themed concert, when he realised the second of Duran Duran's two-show residency at the giant Wynn hotel in Las Vegas last year fell on 31 October. "The Vegas shows were meant to be a warm-up for The Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame," admits Nick. Duran were duly inducted into the ceremony

on 5 November, an honour that, even by the standards of industry prizes sent the band's way since 1980, was a pretty big deal.

"When I realised we were playing on Halloween, I opened my mouth and said: 'We can't just do a regular show. Why don't we surprise everyone with a Halloween show?' Learning so many new songs, it was incredibly ambitious."

"I really, really enjoyed wearing a wedding dress," laughs Simon, of his outfit for *A View To A Kill*. "I'd never worn one before and that was the highpoint of my night."

Virtually every time Duran try a cover in concert, they record a studio demo first, just to get used to how they can make their version work. "We want everyone in the band to have a roadmap for the cover versions," explains John Taylor. "After playing the Halloween songs in Vegas, everyone was vibing off our studio demos. I said to Nick: 'We've got to get these out on Spotify right now!' Nick was the one to pause for thought: 'Maybe we should do this properly.'

"A pretty short conversation bounced around the band. Should we do a live album from the Vegas show? Should we do something more with it?"

Two weeks before rehearsals began for their UK arena tour in April last year, the band booked time in the studio: two days each with Nile Rodgers and Mr Hudson, the Birmingham producer largely responsible for 2015's underrated *Paper Gods*.

As seasoned Duran Duran watchers will know, four days is generally about the time it takes the band to record a bass part for one song. "Typically, we labour over albums," admits John. "The last couple of albums have been hard. Sometimes, that shows. Some songs have worn a number of different clothes during their conception. By the time they come out, you're already worn out by them. This record just feels fresh."

Roger takes up the theme, explaining: "A lot of our studio albums have been long, tortuous processes that take years to get to the point we need. There is certainly a perfectionist streak that runs through all of the band members.

"We're definitely a bunch of perfectionists. Sometimes, that makes for a difficult recording process, where nothing feels good enough. We'll keep working away, recreating, remixing, reworking. With this record, it was all very straightforward."

SPEED IS OF THE ESSENCE

Not only did the four-day deadline focus the mind, Duran's new rapid-fire approach was suggested by Nile Rodgers, as Le Bon recalls: "When Nile walked in to the studio, he explained that sometimes, the first thing you come up with, you automatically disregard because it's come too easily – so you don't think it's any good. But actually, your first instinct might be great. That's what we did.

"We hit on ideas quickly and didn't spend a whole load of time doubting it. It was: 'Yeah, this is fine, let's work on this.' *Danse Macabre*'s title track came first, and that's a very simple song."

For Roger, it was a reminder of Duran's earliest days, as he remembers: "The ethos for this album was: 'Your first ideas are your best ideas. Do it quickly.' When you have that initial creative rush, those ideas are frequently your best ideas. That's how we wrote the first two albums. We'd come up with tunes and go: 'Yeah, that's great.' *Rio* and *Hungry Like The Wolf* were written amazingly quickly, because we trusted who we were and what we were doing.

"Once we got to *Seven And The Ragged Tiger*, we started to question ourselves more and become self-analytical. That's when the tortuous process of album-making began."

Of course, it also helped that the majority of the new album's songs could be traced back to that Las Vegas show. "Everybody had their babies," says John of the choice of cover versions. "We were pleased with *Future Past*, because it gives a good sense of who we are. But on *Danse Macabre*, you can really see behind the curtain of who the whole band is. For me, it was: 'Siouxsie And The Banshees? Fuck yeah!' Then, Simon went somewhere with *Paint It Black* that nobody expected and he's completely made it work."

BEEN THERE BEFORE

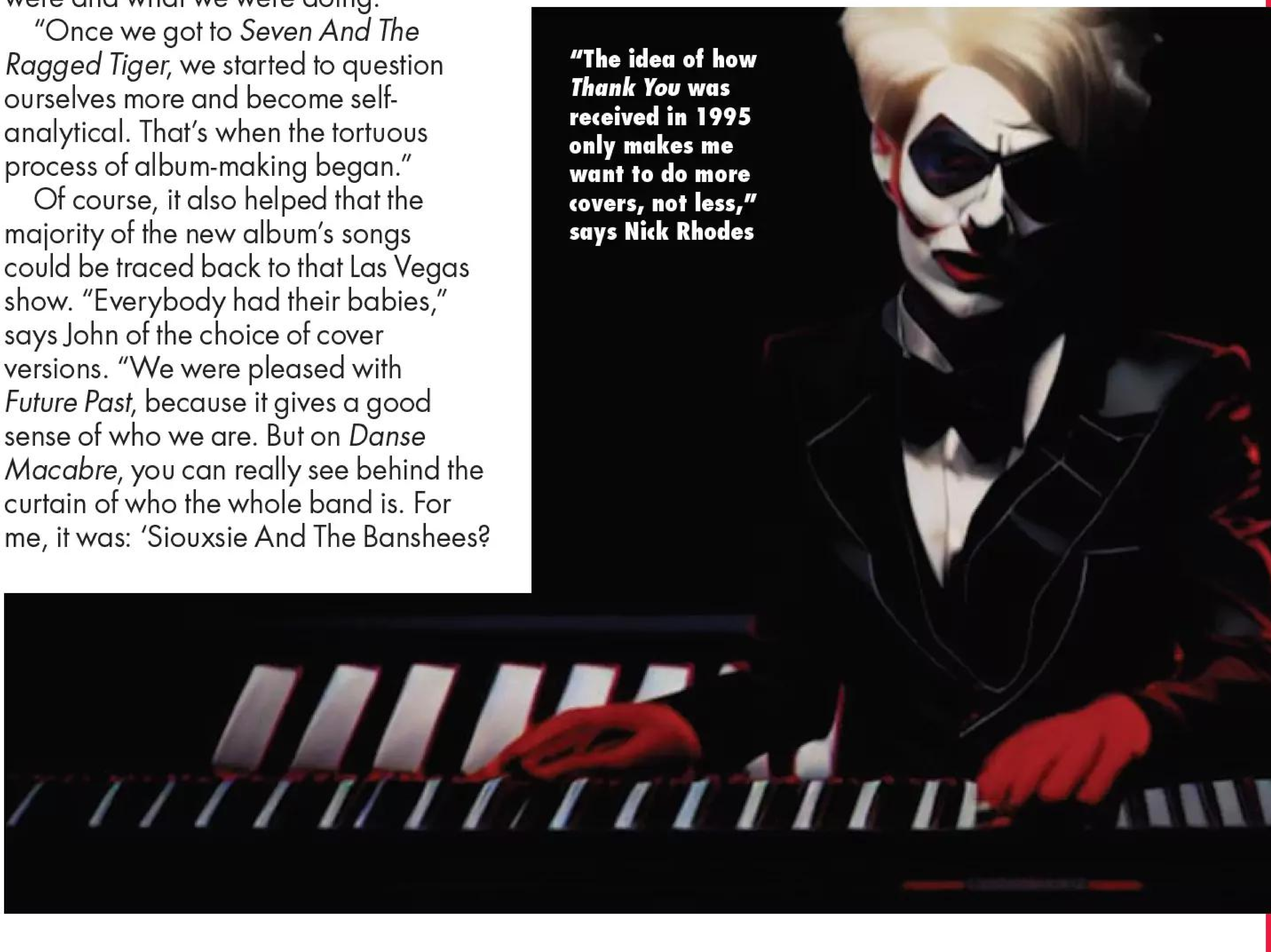
Of course, you can't talk about Duran Duran covers without mentioning the *Thank You* LP from 1995. Commercially, it instantly derailed the progress made by *The Wedding Album* two years previously. It's been rightly reassessed by critics who've given it a second chance since, but the record's unavailability on physical formats means it's been easy to dismiss Duran's versions of *Perfect Day*, *Watching The Detectives* and Public Enemy's *911 Is A Joke*, though their instant party starter take on *White Lines* remains a staple in their shows 28 years on.

"The idea of how *Thank You* was received in 1995 only makes me want to do more covers, not less," laughs Nick. "It's weathered the test of time quite well, that album. At the time, white artists weren't really working with black artists. One reason *Thank You* wasn't successful in America can be summed up by our radio promo person telling us: 'You need to give us a version of *White Lines* without the rap in. I said: 'You've got to be kidding, that's the whole point of it.'

"As for *911 Is A Joke*, Public Enemy really like our version. Lou Reed told Simon of our *Perfect Day*: 'That's the way I'd like to have sung it, if I could.' You can't get more of a compliment.

"Some songs, in hindsight, we might have changed or not done. *Ball Of Confusion* we maybe shouldn't have done. Simon wasn't comfortable with his vocals on that one. But it's win some, lose some and I don't mind what people say about *Thank You* at all."

The Specials' *Ghost Town* is this album's sacred cow that will



"The idea of how *Thank You* was received in 1995 only makes me want to do more covers, not less," says Nick Rhodes

Duran's new record began as a one-off concept gig in Las Vegas and soon evolved into a full album

doubtless have broadsheet critics stating that pop fops like Duran Duran shouldn't touch it. "I'm so happy *Ghost Town* is on there," counters John. "I wasn't into 2-Tone at the time. But looking back now? Holy fuck, The Specials were amazing. I wondered what Simon could do with it, and what Simon came back with is fantastic. As fun as the album is, we took our roles seriously. For me, I wondered: 'How can a rhythm section take on *Supernature*?' Because that's one of the greatest dance songs of all time."

"The originals of all these songs are obviously great," acknowledges Rhodes. "We haven't aimed to say: 'How can we make our versions better?' It's not a competition. Most of our versions are fairly faithful. We've decided to simply play them in our style."

The notable exception is Duran Duran transforming Billie Eilish's playful lo-fi emo bop *Bury A Friend* from her 2019 album *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* into a full goth melodrama. It's stunning, precisely what the Duran of 2023 should be doing. "It's my favourite, too," enthuses Simon. "John turned me on to the song, which I wasn't that familiar with. Billie's original is so brilliant, I thought: 'How on earth am I going to do this without creating a bad impersonation of Billie Eilish?' What she does works for her, but it wouldn't if anyone else tried it."

Salvation came from the seemingly unlikely source of prolific Australian neo-proggers King Gizzard And The Lizard Wizard, via their song *O.N.E.* "Their debut album and *O.N.E.* in particular use a Middle Eastern tonality," explains Le Bon. "They sing in a scale called Hijaz, which is very different from a regular Western melodic scale. I could now get very technical and talk about 'flattened seconds'." Instead, Simon sings an impression of Billie Eilish, before his own version of *Bury A Friend*. It is, readers, a total *treat*. "As I was singing, it felt really exciting, because I took the song somewhere it hadn't been already. I should also say, Billie Eilish's lyrics are *amazing*. I'm very grateful for that. Duran Duran fans will know that I'm too expensive to write too many new lyrics myself."

He's laughing as he says it, but the idea that Simon Le Bon managed to pen lyrics for three new songs in four days is the biggest source of Duran Duran gossip in years. "Doing it so quickly only works when you're properly inspired," he nods. "We were all in that mood on this album. Writing lyrics quickly also works so long as you don't have somebody reviewing your work saying: 'I think you need to change this and this.' That really fucks things up and I have a

HELLO DOLLY

Simon Le Bon makes a cameo on Dolly Parton's new rock LP

In addition to *Danse Macabre*, Simon Le Bon is about to feature on Dolly Parton's new LP *Rockstar* (reviewed this issue on page 79). On an album that also features Debbie Harry and Sting, Simon duets with Dolly on a sublime version of her 1971 song *My Blue Tears*.

They first met at The Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame ceremony last November. "Who doesn't love Dolly Parton?" smiles Le Bon. "She's just a good person. The high point of the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame ceremony was singing a couple of lines of *Jolene* next to someone so extraordinarily wonderful."

Despite his admiration, *My Blue Tears* was challenging, as Simon explains: "The male vocal part was already sketched in, so it was hard to add something that wasn't just what was already there. I think I've added something of my own."

Talk of his vocals leads Simon to explain how he developed his own style. "On *Danse Macabre*, I've upgraded my vocal on *Love Voodoo* (now retitled *Love Voudou*) by trying to make it more like Stevie Wonder – I've never done a Simon Le Bon version of Stevie Wonder before.

"It was about time I tried that. I started off as a David Bowie impersonator, then a Peter Gabriel impersonator, then Johnny Rotten and Patti Smith. Out of all that came Simon Le Bon.

"All those other singers' styles affected me, went through my own filters and sieves. They got fed into the machine, and what came out of the other end is me."

"ANDY JUST LOVES TO PLAY GUITAR, SO IT WAS A PRIVILEGE SEEING HIM IN ACTION

SIMON LE BON

phrase for it: the lyrical policeman. The lyrical policeman doesn't work if you want things done quickly."

That speed of thought means the new album ends on *Confession In The Afterlife*. There's an obvious question here: Why has it taken Duran Duran 43 years to create a song with the none-more-Duran title of *Confession In The Afterlife*? "Had Simon shown me a song with that title in 1980, I'd have said: 'Yes, absolutely, that's the opening album track,'" smiles Nick, as Le Bon reveals: "I'm glad you've picked up on it being such a Duran title. I really love that song, it could be on an Arcadia album. It came from playing around with the idea of what it would feel like if you really were dead. What if there's the retention of memory in the afterlife? I realised nothing would matter. You could say what you like, because there's nothing anybody could do to you."

AXE HEROES UNITE

John eulogises regular Duran live guitarist Dom Brown's bluesy solo on the song. "It's the emotional highpoint on the album," the bassist raves. "It's nice to represent Duran Duran's story of guitarists on this record, and Dom plays the most emotionally charged solo on the whole album."

Bearing in mind the role the guitar plays in *Danse Macabre*, that's big talk from John Taylor. This is, of course, the only album to feature both Andy Taylor and Warren Cuccurullo. Throw in Nile Rodgers, too, and there's a wonderful array of guitar talent across its 13 songs. ("The album had to feature 13 songs," emphasises Rhodes. "It's a Halloween album, it couldn't have any other number.")

Nick explains the idea started from wanting Andy and Warren to play at The Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame. Warren said no because he thought it should be Andy's time in the spotlight. Andy, of course, was then unable to appear because of his prostate cancer diagnosis.

"When we started this record, I thought if Andy was able to play on it that it might be something positive for him," recalls Nick. "The others said it'd be a nice gesture to ask. Plus, of course, Andy is a great guitarist. He thinks so fast and was able to play on 10 songs in three days."

Simon flew with engineer Josh Blair to the guitarist's home in Ibiza to record those parts. "Working with Andy again was amazing," says Le Bon. "Nick is right, Andy is so quick. Andy just loves to play guitar, so it was a privilege seeing him in action. It was funny how quick it was, getting back in the swing of Andy being there. Yasmin came, too, she stayed by the pool. It was just an amazing few days, a really lovely time."

Rhodes' reasoning was that, if Andy Taylor was temporarily rejoining Duran Duran, so should Warren Cuccurullo, missing since the original line-up reformed in 2002. "Warren was my next thought after Andy," the keyboardist explains. "I've always loved the way Warren plays. As a guitarist, Warren is one of the great wonders of the world. Whatever you think Warren is going to play, he does something else. His mind is a completely unpredictable maze of dark corridors, with strange gifts at the end of each one. What Warren delivers on the title track of *Danse Macabre* is something unique and remarkable."

All of the band share that enthusiasm, with Roger summarising: "Whenever I play *Come Undone* or *Ordinary World* in concert, I have an enormous sense of gratitude for the extra dimension that Warren brought to Duran, so it's amazing he's come back for this record."

As great as Warren's contribution is, the fact *Black Moonlight*'s groove lives up to the idea of Nile Rodgers and Andy Taylor on the same song is a proper moment. "Just stay close to Nile in the studio and you'll be grooving," laughs John. "Nile always stays current and is very fluid in his creativity. He doesn't second-guess himself, he just goes with the flow.

"He and Mark Ronson are great at pushing us outside of our comfort zone. Left on our own, we might say: 'No, we can't do that,' but they're great at broadening our boundaries and saying: 'No, it's all cool.'"

Warren Cuccurullo appears on *Love Voudou* and on the new album's title track

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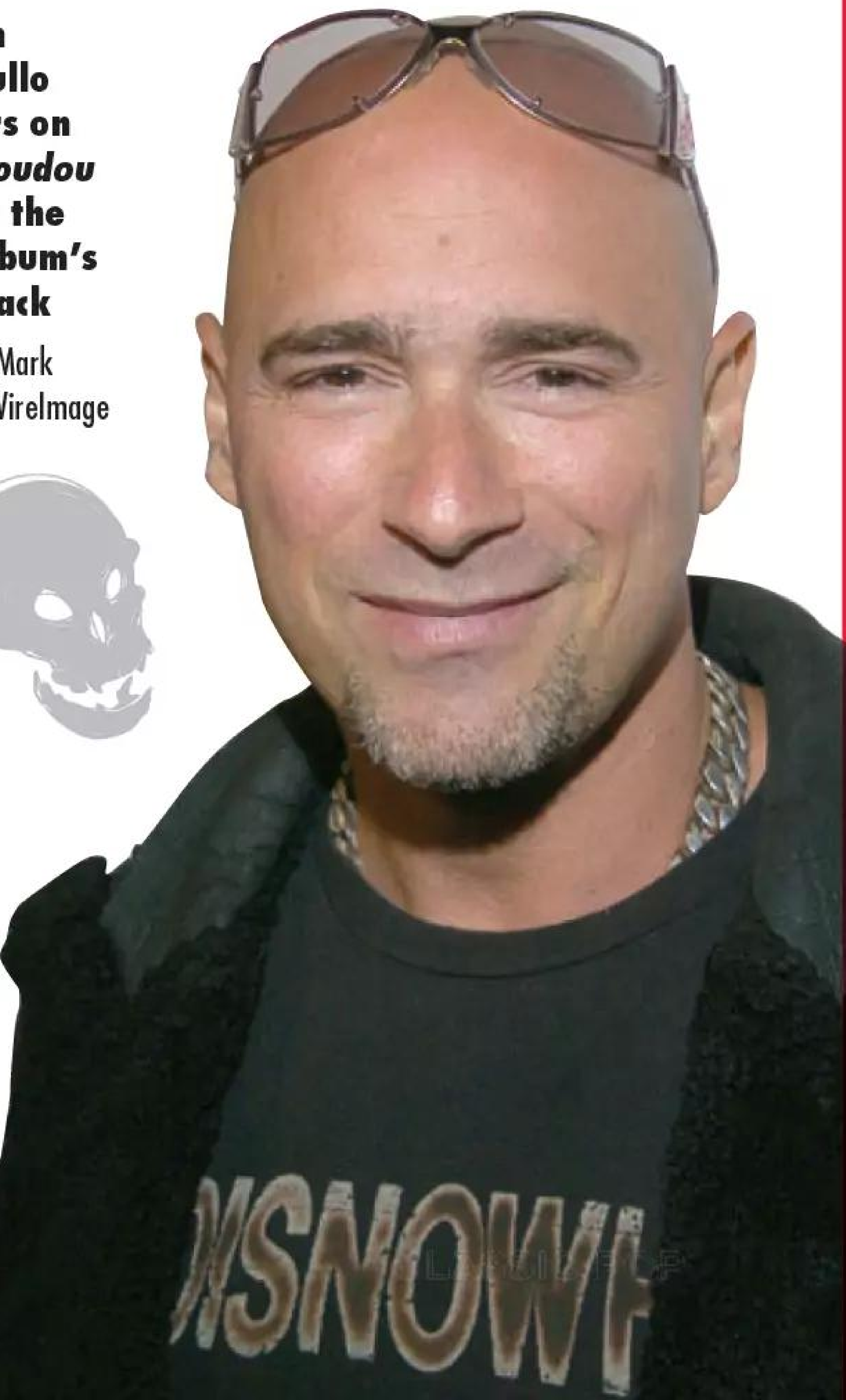

GET IT ON AGAIN?

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As well as revealing his desire to tour Duran Duran's first two albums in full, Andy Taylor has stated he would like to start up The Power Station again with John Taylor.

Following the deaths of Robert Palmer, Bernard Edwards and Tony Thompson from the original line-up, Andy says he'd love Prince And The New Power Generation's Michael Bland to take over on drums – with Paolo Nutini the ideal replacement as frontman.

It's not, however, an idea that appeals to John. "I don't think so," says John immediately when Andy's idea is mentioned. "First of all, The Power Station was built around Tony Thompson's drumming."

John admits he still has bad memories of the notoriously debauched tour, when Michael Des Barres replaced Palmer, who instead pursued his solo career. "The Power Station's first album was so much greater than we ever imagined we could have achieved," he recalls. "That meant, of course, we wanted to take it on the road. But without Robert, it wasn't all there. And we got so carried away on that tour."

Despite his own reservations, John has no qualms if Andy wants to revive the band himself. "Andy is welcome if he wants to take The Power Station out," he insists. "If Andy feels it's something he wants to do, he should absolutely go for it. But it's not for me."

Of the three reworked existing Duran Duran songs on *Danse Macabre*, *Union Of The Snake*'s B-side *Secret Oktober* is special for Andy, John and Roger – as none of them played on the 1983 original. Famously in Duran lore, the band were told so late in the day that they needed a new B-side that only Simon, Nick and producer Alex Sadkin appear on the song.

"I've always loved *Secret Oktober*," laughs Roger. "I've always been happy to do it live, as I love programming and using electronics in my kit, but I'm pleased that we've managed to take the song somewhere greater with the new version."

Nick adds: "When we did the Halloween show, we thought about the obvious big Duran songs that slightly fitted into the Halloween area: *The Wild Boys*, *Hungry Like The Wolf*. But for an album, that felt less appropriate than taking some of our less predictable songs and letting them shine."

DUSTY BINNED

Even in that short spell of four days in the studio, not everything went perfectly. Simon was disappointed that the rest of the band rejected his idea to cover the Eagles' *Witchy Woman*, noting: "I'm a huge fan of the Eagles, but it was deemed unacceptable." In return, the singer couldn't get to grips with covering Dusty Springfield's 1968 single *Spooky*. "The original of *Spooky* works because the vocal is very straight, but the backing is really curvy," explains Le Bon. "Each note Dusty sings is very straight and precise, and the placement of a very straight vocal over a blue-sounding backing makes it work. Another example is Canned Heat's *Going Up The Country*: straight vocals over a very twangy backing.

"But our backing was as straight as Dusty's vocal. I tried to sing the melody and it just wasn't going to work: it was too straight over straight. So I tried to make my vocals curvy, and that didn't work either.

"I could have tried to force myself to make it sort-of work, but I know I'd have cringed every time I heard it. I really love *Spooky*, but I had to say: 'Sorry, I'm just not going to sing this.'" Another big laugh. "You have to trust the singer sometimes."

John accepts Simon's decision, shrugging: "For the most part, we all dug what each of us chose, but Simon just didn't like what we did with *Spooky*. That's fine – maybe we'll make it work one day."

As Nick points out: "You can't win every decision, and we respect each other's judgement. Besides, if we had finished *Spooky*, that would mean we'd have had 14 songs. Something would have had to be dropped from the album anyway, to get it back to 13 songs."

Rhodes prefers to highlight how great Simon's vocals are on their ferocious version

Night versions: Full goth melodrama is a good fit for the Duran Duran of 2023

"IT FEELS LIKE DURAN DURAN HAVE REACHED CRITICAL MASS

ROGER TAYLOR

of Talking Heads' classic *Psycho Killer*: "David Byrne singing *Psycho Killer* is one of the greatest vocals ever, but Simon thought that song was in our area. What he does with that song shows he was totally right." Le Bon agrees: "Oh, I just loved doing *Psycho Killer* in Vegas. That's one of our great covers, it had to be on the album."

Danse Macabre is in effect the culmination of Nick and John's teenage friendship, when they'd watch *Hammer House Of Horror* films at Nick's parents' house.

"As teenagers, the most exciting part of our week was watching those films," Rhodes remembers. "For people of our generation, those films were important – they shaped us, and I've never forgotten their impact. You never knew what you were going to get: vampires, werewolves, maybe even Raquel Welch."

Even before that, Nick's love of Halloween had taken hold. Real surname Bates, Nick's parents ran Bates' Toy Shop in Birmingham: "When I was 10, I'd arrange the toyshop windows. That was great fun, and I'd always put a ouija board front and centre in the display. My mom had complaints that it wasn't appropriate. I asked her: 'What's the problem?', because I liked the idea of having conversations with the dead. Actually, *Conversations With The Dead* isn't a bad song title either."

The young Simon Le Bon was also interested in the paranormal. "I liked scaring myself," he chuckles. "I once convinced myself I saw a ghost. Later, of course, I realised what it was: I was just convincing myself. I don't believe in ghosts or anything like that now."

Despite Simon's scepticism, *Danse Macabre* is Duran Duran placing themselves front and centre for Halloween mischief in music. "We wanted to capitalise on Halloween," admits Nick. "It's our chance to say: 'Let's own a bit of Halloween.' Let's face it, Halloween is the most Duran Duran celebration of the year: it's funny, uplifting and people wear fabulous outfits. What more do you want?" What is Rhodes' preferred Halloween costume? "I favour vampires, as they're my spiritual family," he considers. "But it's difficult. When I dress up for Halloween, people just say: 'I see Nick has come as himself.'"

CHRISTMAS IS CANCELLED

The album certainly feels a more natural fit for the band than a Christmas record. Not that they haven't had offers. "We were approached to do a Christmas single at one point," reveals Roger. "We thought it was too cheesy, so we didn't do it. I often say we should have said yes, because we'd still be getting a ton of royalties now. No, it was too corny. I can't imagine we'd do a Christmas album now, unless it was an extremely different take on the idea."

Nick gives the notion equally short shrift, saying: "I celebrate Christmas the same as everyone, but it's not something close to my heart. In a strange, beautiful way, Halloween is dear to me. I love that it's a pagan celebration of craziness.

"As a kid, witches, black cats, demons and monsters were much more appealing than some big guy with a beard in a red suit."

As well as forcing Duran to go with their first instincts, the recording of *Danse Macabre* had to be quick, as the second leg of the Future Past Tour was approaching. The shows have received some of the best reviews of their career.

"It feels like Duran Duran have reached critical mass," ponders Roger. "For the previous few tours, we played to our hardcore audience. Maybe because of The Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, a mass of people want to see us now. We're getting the kind of audience the Eagles have. *Future Past* hit the spot, too. Whatever the combination of reasons, it feels as though we've hit it big again."

As huge as their shows are, could Duran keep it intimate and play *Danse Macabre* in full next Halloween? Ideally at a suitably spooky venue? "Oh, we absolutely should," agrees John. "Our Halloween next year should be built around this album. It's always good to have plans."

Rhodes considers: "There are any number of great gothic venues in the UK. The Royal Albert Hall would be nice and grandiose. Halloween is so mainstream in America, anywhere could work. We could play Madison Square Garden and they'd be up for a *Danse Macabre* Halloween show."

As for Simon? "The Coliseum in Italy, bowls of flame all around us, that's the vibe *Danse Macabre* should have. I grew up near West Wycombe, and The Hellfire Caves there would also be brilliant."

A pause, before a final burst of Le Bon enthusiasm. "No! HANG ON. Above The Hellfire Caves, there's a mausoleum built in to it. It's a gothic folly: a circle with arches and no roof. It's in lots of Hammer Horror films. It would be like playing Stonehenge. *That's* the place we should do a *Danse Macabre* show."

That's 31 October sorted, then. Halloween in music definitely now belongs to Duran. With *Danse Macabre*, they've made an album full of life – and a hint of the afterlife, too. See you under the black moonlight...

● ***Danse Macabre* is released on 27 October via Tape Modern/BMG and reviewed on page 75**

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CLASSIC ALBUM

SCOUNDREL DAYS A-HA

THE DARK SOPHOMORE LONG-PLAYER THAT'S MORE SMASHING PUMPKINS THAN *SMASH HITS*

FELIX ROWE

Just how on earth do you follow up *that* song? With the difficult second album. Norway's finest returned with a much darker record – a melodramatic synth-operetta that revealed a more complex and intriguing group than their poster boys image would suggest.

At the risk of stating the bleeding obvious, *Take On Me* is a seriously good pop song. In fact, it's too good; so apparently effortless, immediately accessible and easy on the ear that we tend to overlook quite how sophisticated, intricate and well-crafted it is. It's even simpler to dismiss its instantly hummable hook as mere bubblegum fodder, when delivered by three easy-on-the-eye Nordic cherubs, barely out of their teens. It's so inherently marketable, the cynical might suspect foul play. Only when you stop to analyse its constituent parts (and attempt to hit that note) does the penny finally drop that you're dealing with three heavyweight musos who've really got their shit together. Seriously good pop indeed.

Needless to say, it conquered the world through heavy MTV and radio rotation. The album from which it came, 1985's *Hunting High And Low* was equally ubiquitous, selling by the bucketload and producing another hit single, *The Sun Always Shines On TV*. When you've set the bar so high, where do you go from there? That was the very real problem that a-ha had created for themselves. Of course, it's a good problem to have. They were riding a wave of adulation; where they took it next was up to them.

In 1986, singer Morten Harket was interviewed for Australian TV during the band's first world tour (playing comparatively modest 2,000- to 4,000-capacity venues) off the back of that first record. Despite a packed schedule, the band were somehow managing to squeeze in some studio time Down Under, attempting to finish off the next record. During the interview, Morten was asked the inevitable awkward question of how he

THAT FIRST RECORD FORGED THEIR POP POSTER BOYS IMAGE, WHICH STILL DEFINES THEM TO THIS DAY. IN REALITY, *SCOUNDREL DAYS* SETS OUT TO PROVE IT WAS AN ILL-FITTING TAG THAT NEVER REALLY SUITED THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE.

Norse pop giants a-ha: *Scoundrel Days* made it to No.2 in the UK and went on to sell more than six million copies worldwide

felt about being 'packaged' – he responded in good spirits, gently emphasising it was the music that ultimately mattered to them, the connection with the audience, and the chemistry of the band.

That first record forged their pop poster boys image, which (for the casual observer, at least) still defines them to this day. In reality, as second album *Scoundrel Days* sets out to prove, it was an ill-fitting tag that never really suited them in the first place. They didn't try to escape the shadow of *Take On Me* by writing even bigger pop songs. Instead, they ventured into darker terrain. A first listen of *Scoundrel Days* suggests it was designed to be a correction – a realignment that wiped clean all you thought you knew about a-ha and reintroduced them as sophisti-pop connoisseurs.

Often throughout, Morten's vocal stylings are reminiscent of Simon Le Bon's rich powerhouse delivery, but unlike Duran Duran's projection of decadence, glamour and yachts in the Caribbean, a-ha's imagery on *Scoundrel Days* fixates on subjects ranging from isolation and personal terror, to abstract notions of searching for whales. Even the album's title projects the contrary image of rough edges and seediness.

With its grandiose epic melodrama and verbose gothic lyricism, this brand of a-ha is more Smashing Pumpkins than *Smash Hits*. It's tempting to draw some comparisons with their contemporaries Talk Talk, who initially were marketed as the 'next Duran Duran' by

Morten Harket on *Scoundrel Days*: "It didn't sell anywhere near as much as *Hunting High And Low*. It demands more from the listener."

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THE SONGS

1 SCOUNDREL DAYS
"Was that somebody screaming?" It's a bold opening line over an eerie arpeggiated synth line – a combination that reeks of early Human League, particularly in the Philip Oakey vocal stylings, with a little Depeche Mode thrown in. The lyrics are almost uncomfortably direct: "I can feel the sweat on my lips leaking into my mouth", and vaguely opera-like in their stream-of-consciousness delivery. The title track is gothic, cinematic and dramatic. We can only assume the abstract opening minute is intended to filter out casual fans before it hits that soaring chorus we've come to know a-ha for. Here on in, it's got the powerhouse drama of Duran Duran, though much more menacing than many fans would expect, with the darkness of The Cure or Echo And The Bunnymen. Live strings in the final third give a cinematic feel that hints perhaps of their later Bond theme.

2 THE SWING OF THINGS
It opens with jingly bell synths that recall Depeche once again, a cool bass sound and electro tom-tom drum fills, followed by a jittery beat, before dropping into half-time for the chorus (oh so very a-ha!). Their influence on Coldplay is very apparent in the epic singalong chorus. The synth sounds are fantastic, and so completely of their time, with the baritone vocals. Very lyrical, and again, it's an epic, melodramatic sound. Over the course of four-plus minutes, *The Swing Of Things* morphs through at least seven different genres – constantly switching the rhythm or mood as soon as you feel you have a handle on it. Eventually, it rises into a driving rock song, thanks to propulsive drums that wouldn't be out of place on a Bruce Springsteen drivetime anthem like *Born To Run*.

3 I'VE BEEN LOSING YOU
The first single of the record. A lighter mid-tempo, yet upbeat, track, with more frenetic drums from Michael Sturgis (listen out for that totally ridiculous drum fill after a break just under four minutes in) and a groovy bassline. On first listen, it's not an immediately obvious choice for a single, but then that's just indicative of the darker sound that characterises the album. On repeated listens, it reveals itself to be an anthem of epic proportions. Again, it's got all the strut and swagger of Duran Duran dancing on the sand. The live drums add muscle and grit to the sound. The song's genesis apparently began from a track from Waaktaar and Furuholmen's earlier pre-a-ha group, Bridges.

4 OCTOBER
A total change of pace here, opening with an atmospheric intro with a slightly incongruous blend of found sounds: ocean waves lapping against the shore, mangled church bells, footsteps and more otherworldly sonics. From here, it then breaks into elevator muzak, lounge bossa nova with an 808 drum pattern, before the whispered vocals inject a more menacing quality, at odds with the backing track, music hall brass, and whimsical whistling. Combined with the vaguely mockney vocal styling it comes off as a precursor to Damon Albarn's fairground ride interludes that punctuate Blur's 'Life' trilogy a decade later. Wait a minute, did a-ha just invent Britpop?

5 MANHATTAN SKYLINE
A chiming, glistening synth harpsichord sound waltzes along beautifully, as a subtle and subdued Morten sings "wave goodbye" in a sweet falsetto, before a minute in, dirty grungy guitars and eerie synths arrive and shake up all preconceptions as the vocal turns into a guttural primal growl. This is a-ha at their absolute best, experimental and genuinely thrilling.

6 CRY WOLF
Opening with the suggestion of screaming crowds, over a spooky spoken word, before a very funky synth bassline (with shades of *Thriller*) and another frenetic drum part. One of the catchiest tracks, particularly with the falsetto "woo-ooh" refrain on the chorus after the "cry wolf". This could almost pass for Talking Heads on *Speaking In Tongues* in its pure, angular white-boy funkiness and percussive stabs. One of a few tracks to build around a groove rather than a chord progression.

7 WE'RE LOOKING FOR THE WHALES
After a chugging, atmospheric synth introduction, a slow beat then skips to double time (the recurring a-ha trademark). With its upbeat major key progression, it's one of most straight up pop-sounding tracks on the album... but also not, with its abstract lyrical content.

8 THE WEIGHT OF THE WIND
Another characteristically 80s intro with snappy keyboards and busy programmed drums, leading into a dramatic soaring, almost operatic vocal from Morten replete with heavy lyrical imagery. There's a particularly whizzy synth solo two minutes in. This brand of pompous bluster would later be replicated by The Killers to great effect.

9 MAYBE, MAYBE
Suddenly, the mood is switched entirely, with a very light and bouncy Paul McCartney vibe The lyrics here seem dangerously close to the classic Morrissey line (coincidentally or not) released in the same year: "Maybe, you were only joking when you said that you were walking out on me." OK, well perhaps that's not quite as bad as being bludgeoned in your bed, Morten. Vocally, it's tinged with a little Roy Orbison vibrato, further enhancing the Mozza effect. It was released as a single – though apparently only in Bolivia, and exactly what enamoured it to that territory would be interesting to know. It's a fun, good-time catchy melody. With its plodding, almost ska-lite rhythm, it's comparatively throwaway compared to the more dramatic moments elsewhere, but a necessary change and one of the most accessible songs on the record. A frantically busy synth interlude takes it somewhere different.

10 SOFT RAINS OF APRIL
A dramatic opening, with synth pads and arpeggiating electronica, later joined by synthesized harp sounds and eerie keyboards. This album, and indeed this song in particular, highlights how real-deal musos a-ha actually were. It's really quite proggy. Following the earlier vocals, which are caked in reverb, the very last word of the song (and album), appropriately 'over', is dry, close and up-front, ending the record with a sudden, strange feeling of claustrophobic intimacy. This track was another cut lifted from Mags' and Pål's Bridges days.

© Getty

A-ha forged the "epic melancholia" that filled *Scoundrel Days* in early 1986 at R.G. Jones Studio in Wimbledon, South-West London

THE PLAYERS

MORTEN HARKET
The frontman's versatile voice and unparalleled range provide the perfect vehicle for delivering his bandmates' self-declared 'epic melancholia'. On *Scoundrel Days* the singer explores a wide variety of emotions and moods.

MAGNE FURUHOLMEN
The keyboard player and half of a-ha's core songwriting team. Mags and his cohorts explored darker territory on *Scoundrel Days*. Furuholmen takes co-production duties with Waaktaar on three of its tracks.

PÅL WAAKTAAR
The guitarist, and other half of the songwriting duo, brings his instrument to the fore on this record, adding meat and muscle to the band's sound, most notably on the excellent single, *Manhattan Skyline*, which was a well-deserved Top 20 hit in the UK.

MIKE STURGIS
An in-demand studio drummer, who has played with many of the old prog-rock heroes that a-ha precursor group, Bridges, admired so much. Sturgis performs on three of the tracks, including a prominent feature in lead single, *I've Been Losing You*.

ØYSTEIN JEVANORD
Their ex-Bridges bandmate played drums on the funky single, *Cry Wolf*.

ALAN TARNEY
Aside from a-ha, producer Tarney is best known for his work with Cliff Richard And The Shadows, though he later worked with Saint Etienne and Pulp. Tarney was responsible for the re-recording of *Take On Me* helping to craft it into the pop juggernaut we know and love today.

their record company, before breaking the mould to evolve into something more complex, pastoral and experimental.

A-ha are the textbook example that it takes 10 years to become an overnight success. The pre-fame rock band, Bridges (formed in the late 70s by teenage chums, Pål Waaktaar and Magne Furuholmen) was pivotal in the development of their sound. Growing up on prog rock and psychedelic bands, their songcraft is as much indebted to Genesis and King Crimson as the synth-pop trappings they adopted of their own era. Once you understand that, it's easy to identify in the proggy tempo changes, unexpected turns and abstract flourishes that abound on *Scoundrel Days*. See, for example, a-ha's classic trademark fast/slow pivot, as exhibited previously on *Take On Me*, which rears its head on several occasions.

All of the songs on *Scoundrel Days* were written by Waaktaar and Furuholmen, with several composed solely by the former. Indeed, some of them began as either ideas or fully-fledged songs originally performed by Bridges – a catalogue of riches to be mined. (The original version of *Soft Rains Of April* finally saw the light of day in 2018, when Bridges' second LP, *Våkenatt* was released, almost four decades after its recording.)

Despite his contributions to a couple of tracks on the first record, Morten Harket stepped back from the writing process. His limited involvement in this element has remained fairly consistent throughout the band's career. Yet, while he rarely pens the lyrics or melodies that he performs, Morten owns them entirely, delivering his bandmates' words with absolute conviction, eking out the emotion of each syllable. Though there are clear and frequent stylistic reference points to his contemporaries, Harket's range is without equal and his personality key to a-ha's unique character.

DIFFICULT SECOND ALBUM

The album was largely produced by Alan Turney, who'd been brought in on *Hunting High And Low* to deliver the hit singles. God knows what the record label must have thought, then, when they turned in *Scoundrel Days*, because there's little here that is as immediate or instantly accessible.

Even on the singles, *Scoundrel Days* demands more of the listener. The answers aren't laid out in a conveniently digestible format, instead requiring repeated listens to unpick. Throughout, arrangements are busy, often densely layered in a slightly muddy mix. Sure, there's an expensive sounding gloss, but it's tempered by the many idiosyncratic twists a-ha take. Nothing is accidental, it's all very deliberately crafted. The lyrical choices, melodic or rhythmic turns, and occasionally abrasive moments are wilfully abstruse.

There's plenty of melodrama in the Tears For Fears mould, but actually it's much weirder, more experimental and gothic than the Bath duo in many ways. In 2009, Magne told Dermot O'Leary during an interview with BBC Radio 2: "I feel more connected to Depeche Mode" when compared to their other contemporaries. That analogy certainly feels apt for much of *Scoundrel Days*, particularly when Morten delivers bleak couplets in a rich baritone over icy synths.

But it's not all weighty, impending doom. A-ha's 'epic melancholia' (as Mags describes it) has always traversed that thin line between pain and euphoria – or "Dancing with tears in my eyes" as another contemporary might have put it. There are lighter moments, even those approaching whimsy, like *Maybe, Maybe*, which could just about pass for Syd Barrett if you strained your ear. And *Cry Wolf*, its menacing folktale inspiration aside, is as downright funky as anything Prince contributed to the dancefloor in the mid-80s. At various points, the album is danceable, uplifting and a hell of a lot of fun.

Waaktaar's guitar hero ambitions are brought to the fore more explicitly, with thrilling results. While it's still fundamentally a synth-pop record at heart (complete with all its stylistic trappings), a-ha are expanding the palette with occasionally abrasive guitars (see *Manhattan Skyline*) and quite frankly ridiculous drumming from session extraordinaire, Mike Sturgis. During those overblown fills on *I've Been*

Onstage during their 1986 world tour at the Johanneshovs Isstadion in Stockholm, a month after the release of *Scoundrel Days*

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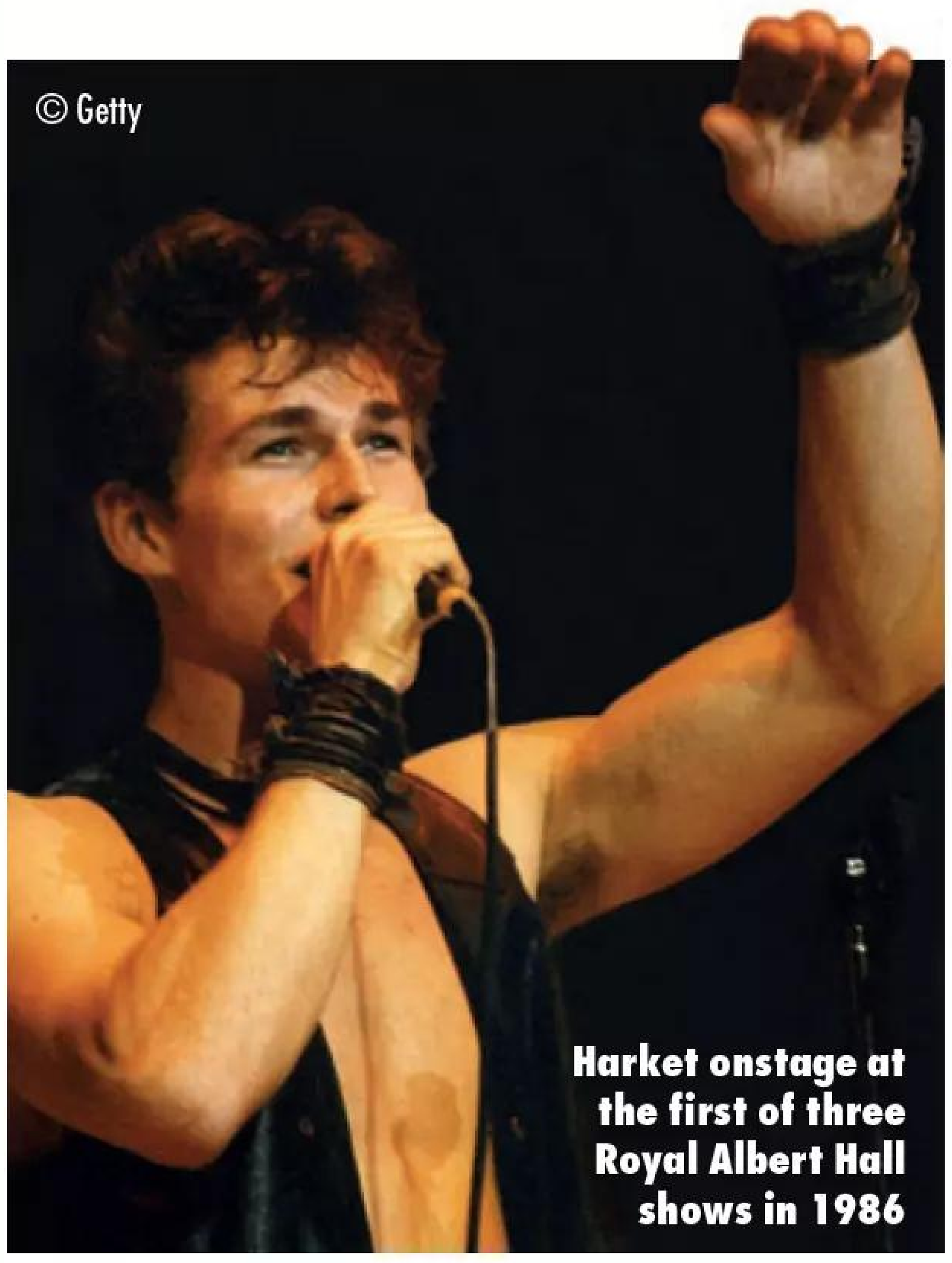
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Harket onstage at the first of three Royal Albert Hall shows in 1986

Losing You, you half expect the drummer to spontaneously combust in a *Spinal Tap*-esque puff of smoke. Clearly, they're having fun with it, delivering the pomp with a raised eyebrow.

Scoundrel Days is a tricky one to place at times. Critics might argue the songs are slightly stilted by the robust and brittle mid-80s production treatment. On record, it's near impossible to separate the core of each track from its muscular stylistic trappings. However, watching the same songs performed live at a 1994 arena show in South Africa, it's a totally different beat – loose, raw, rocky, and well-worn in like your favourite pair of old jeans. By now you're witnessing a well-oiled live unit that's confident enough in its tightness to play it loose. Both versions have their merits, but the fact that the songs have evolved into enduring and anthemic fan favourites is testament to their power.

Since that first meteoric rise, a-ha have remained underdogs of sorts. Rock royalty in their native Norway and quietly selling out colossal venues around the world, if never quite matching those heights in the UK and US mainstream. But time has served them well, with ongoing props from transatlantic rock A-listers like Coldplay and Weezer further cementing their status within that league. Despite the attempts of *Scoundrel Days*, they will never shake the clutches of *Take On Me*. Some 35 years after conquering MTV, *Take On Me* conquered its successor platform, YouTube. In 2020, it became one of a select few to reach the one billion views mark (since then, that figure has nearly doubled).

Scoundrel Days is a-ha's 'difficult second album'. But don't confuse that for a lack of ambition or running out of steam. On the contrary, it was intentionally engineered that way; a deliberate altering of course that didn't thwart their legacy, but merely rebuilt it in their own design. It was no commercial flop, going on to shift more than six million copies worldwide and counting. In truth, it's not a drastic departure from the sound that made them bedroom pin-ups, but it asserted artistic ambitions far beyond the two-dimensional image that had been bestowed upon them.

Scoundrel Days is a harder nut to crack, but it's more than worth persevering for the rich rewards it contains inside.

THE VIDEOS

I'VE BEEN LOSING YOU

The band continued their fruitful collaboration with British director, Steve Barron, which had brought them such great success on their first album. (Barron's promo credits are essentially MTV's greatest hits: *Billie Jean, Money For Nothing, Africa, Mad World, Don't You Want Me, Summer of '69*...). No revolutionary effects here, though. In this case, it's a fairly bog standard performance video, filmed live at a show, although it ably serves the purpose of highlighting a-ha's 'authentic' rock star credentials, live energy and adulation. In other words, lots of soft and blurred focus shots of Morten's sweating torso, slow motion posturing and freeze frames of a rapturous crowd, comprised (of course) of adoring young female fans.

CRY WOLF

Again directed by now regular collaborator, Steve Barron, in France. Riffing on the 'Big Bad Wolf' motif, it intercuts live footage to screaming fans in a large hall with scenes shot in and around the Château de Couches in Burgundy – a suitable backdrop for the pastoral folk-tale theme. In another groundbreaking effect, a young kid is leafing through a pop-up book, revealing the band as 2.5D cut-outs on card, that are animated on the page. Throughout, there's the tension of a looming threat. Then the angry mob come out to the château at night with lit torches, before disappearing as it returns to the live stage setting. *Cry Wolf* has the feel of a mini movie – an 80s fantasy epic, somewhere between *The Goonies* and The *NeverEnding Story*. Perfect for MTV.

MANHATTAN SKYLINE

Directed by Steve Barron. Taking cues from the iconic hand-drawn rotoscoping *Take On Me* video, this one riffs on the newspaper theme from the opening lyric: "We sit and watch umbrellas fly/ I'm trying to keep my newspaper dry". The animation builds up from black and white, dot-to-dot drawings into outlines of the various band members performing, then moves on to crosswords and newspaper headlines. As the heavy guitar part comes in, the band are now photos within the newspaper that come to life, pre-empting the animated photos in the *Daily Prophet* from Harry Potter. The newspaper at the end is one of Norway's most well-known publications.

Pål is playing the drums in the video – and displaying some genuinely impressive chops at the kit – although in reality on record the part was actually played by his Bridges ex-cohort, Øystein Jevanord.

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With themes of escape, *Scoundrel Days* found the trio trying to break free from their teen-pop image

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final messages?

CEMENTING AN IMPERIOUS RUN THAT STRETCHES BACK OVER THE PAST DECADE, OMD'S NEW ALBUM *BAUHAUS STAIRCASE* COMPLETES A HAT-TRICK OF MAGNIFICENCE STARTED WITH *ENGLISH ELECTRIC* IN 2013. IT EVEN PROVES ANDY McCLUSKEY AND PAUL HUMPHREYS DON'T NEED TO BE IN THE SAME ROOM AFTER ALL TO LIVE UP TO PAST GLORIES. SO WHY ARE THE DUO THINKING OF CALLING IT A DAY IN THE STUDIO?

JOHN EARLS

The title of OMD's new studio album references a 1932 painting by Oskar Schlemmer entitled *Bauhaus Stairway*

"We only started this band because nobody else wanted to play with us." Andy McCluskey's reminder of how the essentially insular world of Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark began serves notice that, even by the standards of synth duos, McCluskey and Paul Humphreys are an unusual pair.

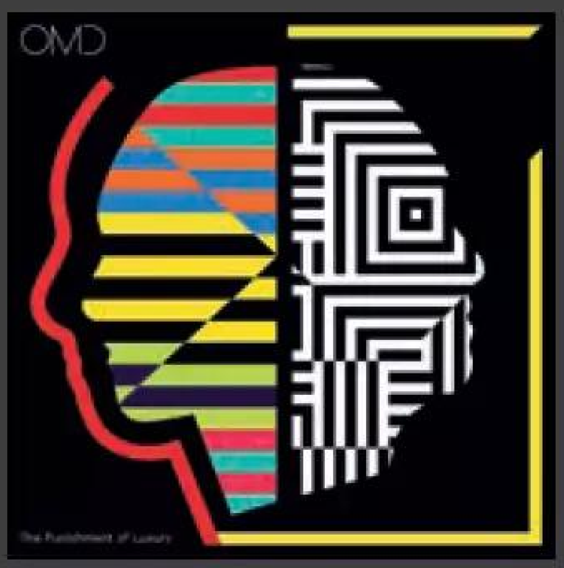
Of course, in Britain at least, OMD invented the synth duo template the moment they began playing their first shows at Eric's in Liverpool in 1978, initially as a side-project from prog six-piece The Id. The pair have much in common, aesthetically as much as musically: they're interviewed separately, but both choose to greet *Classic Pop* from their respective home studios. Not just because it makes for a good Zoom backdrop, but because they both enjoy showing the workings of fabulous new album *Bauhaus Staircase.* (Andy: "If Bauhaus name their next album *OMD Carpet*, I'd be very flattered.") Paul occasionally plays riffs on his keyboard that inspired new songs, while Andy reaches over for the ring-binder containing handwritten A4 notes and lyrics: "Much as I love the digital age, I find it easier to have paper that I can move around from page to page, rather than something locked on the digital screen."

They share an easy sense of humour, too, a natural warmth that's surely been heightened by knowing that OMD might never have had it so good. Not only is their music back to the forward-thinking and infectious standards of *Architecture & Morality* and *Dazzle Ships*, but they no longer have a record company demanding that they make another album that good again by the end of the week, or else...

It's how their humour comes across that highlights the duo's essential differences. If he hadn't been half of one of our most inventive synth-pop groups, Andy McCluskey could easily have become an observational stand-up. You can see something of Lee Mack in his knockabout, brash charm. Paul Humphreys? Probably everyone's favourite lecturer: he doesn't have his bandmate's 'Here's one...' approach to comedy, but his gentle, quietly delivered wit is just as infectious. It'd be too easy to say that's how OMD's approach to songwriting works, too. Even so, they're different in their beliefs on how their songs should sound: the pair's nicknames for each other are 'The Butcher' and 'The Surgeon', and it's not hard to work out which one's which.

"The only time Paul and I ever argue is over the final mixing of songs," smiles McCluskey. "My way of mixing is to try to ensure everything is as loud as everything else. I keep pushing faders until I've lost control. Paul is much more patient and fastidious."

Bauhaus Staircase **is billed as "the band's most explicitly political record" to date and born of their "desire to be both Stockhausen and ABBA"**



Landing at No.4 in the UK, previous album *The Punishment Of Luxury* was OMD's highest charting long-player since 1991's *Sugar Tax* reached No.3

Humphreys agrees, noting: "Andy pulls one way, I pull the other. Where we meet in the middle – that's the OMD sound. I always go for the more purist, Kraftwerk sound, something that's very detailed, clear and clean. Andy wants to get a bit of dirt in. I think he wants too much dirt in our sound, so I bring him back towards the centre. We always find a compromise."

Andy summarises: "I go for what I think is more energy in the mixes. Paul will say: 'It sounds perfect!' and I have to tell him: 'No, it sounds *too* perfect!' We get the balance right eventually – even if I'm convinced he sometimes goes back and takes out some of the dirt after we've agreed."

Quite simply, Paul is more laidback. "I'm definitely the more Type A person," accepts McCluskey. "Paul is a very talented, creative man, but he's quite happy to go: 'I've got this idea, what do you think?' I'll tell him my plan: 'I'm going to do this and *that* with it, twist and turn it into *this*!' and Paul will say: 'OK, sure – off you go.'"

That approach was doubly necessary on *Bauhaus Staircase*. It's an album they hadn't planned to make: the reception to 2013's *English Electric* and its successor *The Punishment Of Luxury* four years later was so ecstatic that neither musician wanted to risk spoiling the run with a dud. What would be the gain?

Inevitably, song ideas nonetheless began to arrive. You'll know *Don't Go*, the shivering ballad initially released for 40th anniversary compilation *Souvenir* in 2019. A whole album, though? What a faff. And then lockdown arrived.

LEGACY STATEMENT

With no shows – or anything else – to keep them occupied, there was time for Andy to write all the songs to go alongside the great titles he'd had filed away, and for Paul to go through all the half-finished ideas on his laptop.

"We'd made an extra effort with *The Punishment Of Luxury*, because we thought it might well be our final album," remembers Humphreys. "We had to make that record as good as it can be, in case it was our last statement. And I think it worked – OMD's fans talk about it as being in our best three albums.

"That was job done. So to then make *another* album? Well, it had to be as good as or even better than *The Punishment Of Luxury*. Why ruin that legacy of our last statement'? So we've had to work just as hard again. We're not a band who are just going to bash out an album to have something new to brand a tour with. This really might be our last album – so it had better be good."

Those song titles Andy had squirrelled away included *Kleptocracy*, *Bauhaus Staircase* and *Anthropocene*. None of these are regular titles, but as far back as OMD's second single *Red Frame/White Light* – written about the phone box in their hometown – McCluskey's lyrical concerns have not been those of other pop stars.

"I keep ideas for song titles and subjects in a book and research them like I would a dissertation," reveals Andy. "I love going to museums and art galleries. I love history, and science. I just explore my own interests in our songs, so I'm a very lucky boy, spending the last 45 years writing about things I want." McCluskey, of course, was the guru who

Of All The Things We've Made: "We're not a band who are just going to bash out an album," says Paul Humphreys

Evolution Of Species: The duo take their sound forward with their 14th LP – "I'm comfortable if this is OMD's last statement," says Andy

oversaw Atomic Kitten's first album, *Right Now*, in 2000. "Even that is a pretty weird and cool album for a girlband," he insists, mock offended. "*Whole Again* doesn't fit the mould of how a girlband should sound."

Anthropocene was the album's working title, until they discovered cult futurist popster Grimes had called her 2020 album *Miss Anthropocene*. "We felt our thunder had been stolen there," Andy grins. "But I'd wanted to write a song called *Anthropocene* for several years, about the era we're living in now, when mankind is directly affecting what happens to the planet."

Anthropocene and the equally ominous *Evolution Of Species* are sci-fi bangers, their ecological message recited partially via Google's text-to-speak function. That such a simple tool is utilised so well is typical of OMD's approach. "When we did our shows playing our early albums in full, it brought home how simple some of those songs were," explains Paul. "We've carried that 'Less is more' ethos through to our music now. When OMD started, all we had was a bass, a synth and an electric piano. Our palette was extremely limited, but we made great records from it.

"Now, there's so much you can do with technology, you have to limit yourself. With the tyranny of choice, you can spend an entire day going through your collection of 2,000 kickdrum sounds and 3,000 snare sounds until you go: 'I just don't know anymore!' You have to choose a palette, like a painter does."

McCluskey – who names 'More Noise Than Signal' as a potentially great song title he's yet to find the right music for – reveals that the abrasive *Kleptocracy* is a song title he's had in mind for five years. It's the clearest example that, for those who like simplistic shorthand, *Bauhaus Staircase* is OMD's political album. While *Dazzle Ships* was the band's exploration of the Cold War, *Bauhaus Staircase* is about being reminded of the beauty of humanity in troubled times – while also giving a well-placed booting to right-wing leaders in *Kleptocracy*.

"We're being ruled by thieves," spits Andy, his usual geniality vanishing. "About five years ago, I started thinking people like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are stealing from us. I think democracy is the right way to go. It's civilised: we might argue, but we accept defeat if the other person gets more votes. But now? Democracy has been stolen by liars."

OMD have called out those they're opposed to before, notably the Ku Klux Klan in *88 Seconds In Greensboro*, but *Kleptocracy* is atypically explicit. "I think people can tell my politics," reasons McCluskey. "I've moved to the centre from where my father was: he was a communist in depression-era Scotland." Ultimately on the centre-left, passionate Remainer Andy states: "A lot of what Jeremy Corbyn said made sense, but a lot of it was unreconstructed 1970s Trotskyism. That isn't going to work, as we don't live in that society anymore. We need a middle ground where everyone functions properly."

"This album wasn't consciously political at first," adds Humphreys. "But we were also conscious we couldn't be too conservative. The way the world is now, it's important to have strong opinions, as the Far Right is on the rise: Trump running for President despite almost 100 felony charges against him, Putin in Ukraine. These are important issues, and it's OK for us to voice our opinions on them more."

> "Andy pulls one way, I pull the other. Where we meet in the middle – that's the OMD sound."
>
> PAUL HUMPHREYS

Although not as directly political, the dizzying title track of *Bauhaus Staircase* pays homage to the Bauhaus art movement in pre-Nazi Germany. It also gives voice to Andy's view that art is more important than ever at moments like lockdown.

A FALSE ECONOMY

"When times are hard, governments tend to think: 'We'll cut back on the non-essentials – and the easiest of those is art,'" ponders McCluskey, a patron of Museums/Art/Liverpool. "That's understandable, but it's a false economy. When times are hard is when you need art most. It feeds your soul, keeps you focused and believing."

At the polar opposite of Andy's thoughtful discourse, *G.E.M.* is a hilariously waspish diss track. "A very good friend is an emotional rollercoaster to be around," smiles McCluskey. "I stood back from their behaviour and thought: 'Really, *this* is your response? I'm definitely writing about all of this in the third verse!' They're partly flattered and partly furious I've written a song about them. It's their own fault. If you hang out with songwriters, it's at your own jeopardy. But some things have to stay secret, so I can't say what *G.E.M.* stands for."

Equally personal but more heartfelt, *Aphrodite's Favourite Child* is such a personal love song that OMD have had to wait over a decade to release it. Initially recorded 12 years ago, it was written for Andy's then partner.

"The song was a present for someone I was very passionate about," he reveals. "It's basically a love letter, and you don't want anyone else to read those. We've since separated. I've recently been back in touch, we're friendly, and I asked her: 'How would you feel if I used the song?' She said enough time has passed and that it's a good song. Some of its lyrics are among my favourite I've ever written: 'Will you hold me closely like a mother holds her only dying child?' gets across the intensity of how I felt about her."

Conversely, *Slow Train* is a stream-of-consciousness track over warped and whomping electro recalling *Strict Machine*-era Goldfrapp. "Oh, the lyrics really are nonsense," laughs McCluskey. "I was scatting vocal sounds over the music until they turned into words." Will a subconscious meaning to them emerge years later? "I doubt it," he shrugs. "*Sailing On The Seven Seas* was written the same way, and those lyrics still don't mean anything either."

Slow Train's "Na-na-na" vocal melody was written by Katrina Kanepe, an aspiring singer-songwriter

© Getty

sailing on bigger seas

OMD's next tour, starting on 27 February 2024, sees the duo play several arenas – including their biggest ever UK indoor show at London's 20,000-capacity O2 on 24 March. "That show is a landmark, but also terrifying," laughs Paul. "We had to have our arms twisted a little to thinking we could sell enough tickets, but our last London shows were to 10,000 people. We try to make sure our show is as good as possible, but I know how expensive gigs feel during a cost of living crisis. We're very grateful – we don't take any of it for granted."

Andy adds that OMD have benefitted from new fans discovering them since playing retro festivals a decade ago.

"They're also a good place to catch up," he smiles. "We were always social but, in the 80s, these were the people stealing our chart places. Most artists have resolved those issues.

"Some people are still a little... unresolved. I won't criticise them, but it's unfortunate when you don't get a conversation out of them."

Andy believes any tension at those festivals is over who's higher on the bill. "It's a simple equation," he reasons. "If you've got 14 hit singles, you can play late on. If you've got two hits, you're on at 2:30pm."

keep dazzling

It's appropriate that OMD's most political album and one of their absolute best records should arrive on the 40th anniversary of their fourth record, *Dazzle Ships*.

Possibly more so than any other original synth-pop LP, *Dazzle Ships* has seen its reputation overturned from being a gargantuan flop into a cult classic, whose chilly Cold War paranoia comes wrapped in earworms.

"*Dazzle Ships* was a reaction against our success," says Humphreys. "A guy from our record company told us: 'All you have to do is make *Architecture & Morality 2* and you'll be the next Genesis!' Which was completely the wrong thing to say to us, as we had no wish to be the next Genesis.

"We wanted to be something completely different, and that comment spurred us on to do something radical. Also, rightly or wrongly, we listened to journalists who told us that: 'Your songs are lovely, but you're not exactly trying to change the world.' So we made a record about the Cold War."

In that atmosphere, the duo knew it wasn't going to sell as many as its predecessor. "I doubted *Dazzle Ships* even as we were making it," Paul admits. "I loved what we were doing, but I had a major concern it would alienate our fanbase. I didn't think it would be well-received – but we knew what we were doing was important."

who Andy met at a local Liverpool studio. After Andy produced her demo, Katrina asked if she could hear some new OMD demos – she promptly came up with *Slow Train's* refrain immediately. And McCluskey's songwriter friend Caroline England penned the lyrics for touching finale *Healing* after telling him she'd help if he ever had writers' block. For a self-contained unit, OMD actually seem pretty welcoming.

"OMD's music is essentially a conversation between Paul and I," Andy theorises. "And if you're having a conversation with yourself, you want to speak your own language, not translate it into someone else's words so you end up saying: 'I wouldn't use those words and this is no longer talking back to me.' But when someone comes along saying: 'Does this add to what you're saying?', that's great. I'm the first to say: 'That's fantastic, thank you!'"

BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES

On a purely practical basis, an external voice was needed during the mixing of the album. Paul has moved house four times since *The Punishment Of Luxury*, ending up in the south of France. If that sounds like the ideal retirement location for a pop star to enjoy life on those sweet *Enola Gay* royalties then... it is. But Humphreys also became a second-time father two years ago to a daughter, Lily, with his wife, Ruta. "Fatherhood at my age was unexpected," admits Paul. "My wife is younger than me, but at the upper age for motherhood. But we were very relaxed during lockdown, and our daughter was the result. My daughter is wonderful, and I didn't want to be one of those distant fathers, so there have been times when this album wasn't my first priority."

> "We finally seem to be getting reverence and respect. The last thing we want to do is undo that good work."
>
> ANDY McCLUSKEY

McCluskey fully supports his bandmate's occasional distance, laughing: "Small children are very time-consuming. Part of me is jealous of Paul's life. I'd love to spend more of my life by a pool in the south of France, and he's deliriously happy about being a dad again."

It's resulted in rock producer David Watts mixing *Kleptocracy* and *Slow Train*. "I worried that *Kleptocracy* sounds totally me," smiles Andy. "It's so full-on, it sounds like Paul hasn't gone near it." Humphreys adds: "David's approach is different to mine, but he's chosen the most appropriate tracks to work on: those songs are aggressive and uptempo. I'm clean and electro, whereas David's rock elements enhance those songs."

While Paul can switch between hands-on fatherhood and kicking back, Andy admits that he's terrible at relaxing. "I just can't sit and do nothing," he frets. "My ex-wife was a sun worshipper. When we went on holiday, it had to be somewhere that she could get a suntan for 10 hours, while I could snorkel, go to an art gallery or trek up a volcano. I'm better than I used to be for relaxing, and can now manage to listen to an audiobook for several hours."

While OMD will carry on touring, even workaholic McCluskey says he has no wish to be "sat here day after day trying to get the energy to make 10 more songs that are good enough." Indeed, it's Humphreys who is keen to try to do more projects, saying that making a movie soundtrack is on his bucket list: "A lot of people say our music is filmic, but nobody has ever offered us a soundtrack," he says.

Whatever, the future, *Bauhaus Staircase* is an album to cherish. If it is their farewell, it's a hell of a statement to bow out on. Paul summarises: "Our rapport is great. Live, OMD are exhilarating and the band is a joy in my life. Life is pretty good."

"It's taken 45 years, but we finally seem to be getting reverence and respect," concludes McCluskey. "The last thing we want to do is undo that good work, so *Bauhaus Staircase* could only arrive when it was good enough. And it is good enough. Right now, OMD is a nice place to be."

● ***Bauhaus Staircase* is out now via 100% and reviewed on page 77. OMD tour from 27 February to 27 March 2024. Visit omd.uk.com for full dates and tickets.**

Bunker Soldiers: Andy McCluskey "rediscovered the creative power of total boredom" during lockdown to fashion the new album with Paul Humphreys

ALBUM BY ALBUM

DEPECHE MODE

THE BASILDON BAND EVOLVED FROM CAREFREE POP PIN-UPS TO DARK ELECTRONIC OVERLORDS IN A PIONEERING CAREER THAT HAS TAKEN SYNTH MUSIC TO NEW STADIUM-SIZED HEIGHTS

JON O'BRIEN

WHILE ITS BLEEPS AND BLOOPS NOW SOUND PRIMITIVE, THEY STILL EXUDE JOYOUS YOUTHFUL OPTIMISM

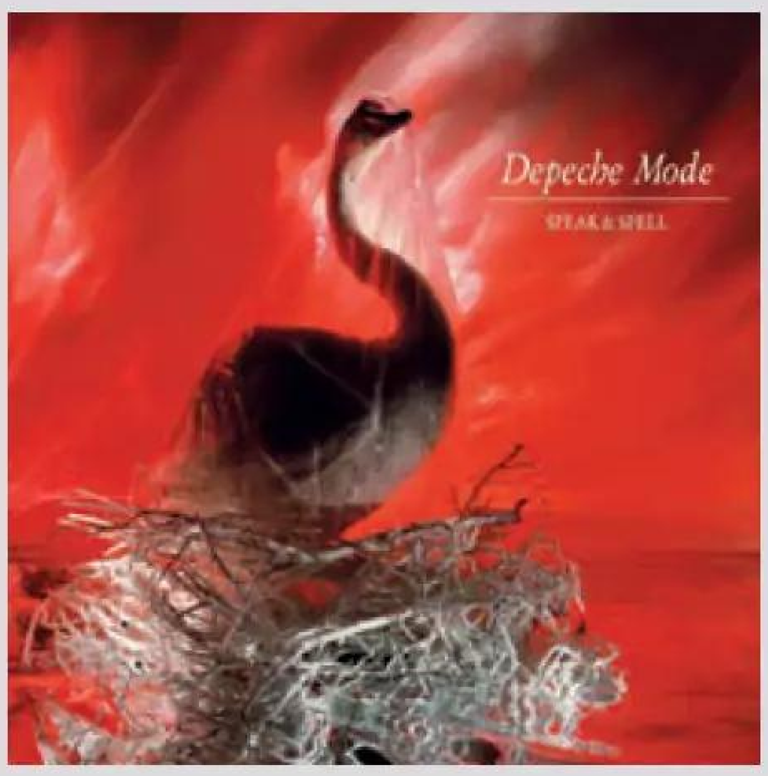
© Getty

After various false starts with the bands No Romance In China and Composition Of Sound, former schoolmates Vince Clarke and Andy Fletcher – along with two other Basildon boys they rounded up along the way – finally gained momentum under a guise inspired by a Parisian style bible.

As shown by the slightly mixed messaging of their *Top Of The Pops* debut – a frilly-bloused Dave Gahan looking every inch the teen discovered at a scout hut jam session and a mesh-vested Martin Gore apparently off to the nearest BDSM club – Depeche Mode were unlikely to grace its pages themselves. But bridging the sonic gap between the pioneering electronica of The Human League and Kraftwerk as well as the *Smash Hits* pop of Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet, their sound was very much in fashion.

Co-produced with Daniel Miller, the Mute Records founder who gazumped several major labels for the band's signature, first studio effort *Speak & Spell* is considered somewhat of an outlier in the band's vast catalogue. Only the moody minimalism of the Gore-sung *Any Second Now (Voices)* hints at the noir masters they would mutate into.

While it's undoubtedly both musically and lyrically the most disposable record of their 43-years-and-counting career – "PG-rated fluff" was *Rolling Stone*'s harsh, if not entirely inaccurate, summary – it's hard not to get swept up in its sheer exuberance. Still only on the cusp of adulthood – Gahan and Gore hadn't yet turned 20 – this is a band confident they're making the music of the future. And while its bleeps and bloops, often resembling the noises of a Speak & Spell toy, now sound primitive, they still exude joyous youthful optimism.



The album's incongruity is, of course, down to Clarke, the chief songwriter who, reportedly tired of increasing media commitments, had made his exit by the year's end. Breakthrough single *New Life* is up there with any of the synth-pop gems Clarke would go on to craft as part of Yazoo and then Erasure. Likewise, *Just Can't Get Enough*, an instant classic so unapologetically upbeat that even a Comic Relief cover by The Saturdays barely needed to change a note.

Less convincing is *What's Your Name?*, which saddles its homoerotic intrigue ("Hey you're such a pretty boy") with sugary sweet synths and sub-Beach Boys harmonies. It's no surprise that the band themselves consider the song a career nadir.

However, this is the only real dud on a playful introduction to their hookier-led talents, albeit one entirely unrepresentative of the darkness that lay ahead.

SPEAK & SPELL
Released 1981
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.10 SWE No.21

Depeche Mode certainly didn't waste any time attempting to prove they could cut it without their previous figurehead: the group first headed into London's Blackwing Studios to record second album *A Broken Frame* in December 1981, just a month after Clarke's swift departure. And within nine months, it had hit the shelves.

First taster *See You* no doubt validated the appointment of Martin Gore as Depeche's new creative force, its UK No.6 peak immediately eclipsing the three singles from *Speak & Spell* (admittedly, Yazoo had scored two Top Three hits by this point, too). Nevertheless, some who'd previously bought into Depeche's hook-driven pop may have been left slightly perturbed by the lack of spright elsewhere.

Indeed, despite retaining producer Daniel Miller, *A Broken Frame* is a much more ominous-sounding affair, a change in direction foreshadowed by the breaking glass sound effects and haunting Gregorian chants which open the first track, *Leave In Silence*. Dave Gahan has arguably never sounded more detached than on *Monument* and *Satellite*, two surprising yet deeply morose forays into dub reggae, for example.

Then there's the brilliantly eerie *Shouldn't Have Done That*, the origin story of a warmongering politician ("Small boy and his infantry/ Marching around so naturally") complete with ghostly sound effects and progressively intense marching beats like something akin to the start of a sacrificial ritual. There's little for a noughties girl group to get their hands on here.

UNLIKELY TO BE MANY FANS' FAVOURITE, IT'S THE KIND OF RECORD THE TRIO NEEDED TO GET OUT OF THEIR SYSTEM

As with its predecessor, the band has occasionally been dismissive of the record since. In 1990, Gore expressed his regrets about all that "sickly boy-next-door stuff," perhaps referencing the slightly self-pitying heartbreak of *The Meaning Of Love* and *A Photograph Of You* ("What use is a souvenir of something we once had/ When all it ever does is make me feel bad?/ I wish I could tear it up/ But then again I haven't the guts"), before adding that it was musically a "mish mash".

But while *A Broken Frame* is unlikely to be many fans' favourite album either – you could argue it's the only 20th century release without a bona fide Depeche Mode classic – it's the kind of record the newly-reduced trio needed to get out of their system. As Miller later told journalist Lisa Blanning: "It's when people really started believing in the future of the band."

A BROKEN FRAME
Released 1982
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.8 SWE No.22

Inspired by an epiphany that Gore experienced at a gig by German noise merchants Einstürzende Neubauten, *Construction Time Again* further exemplified, contrary to engineer Gareth Jones' initial fears, that Depeche Mode were no longer the carefree synth-pop boys of their debut.

The band's first record with keyboardist/arranger Alan Wilder is a deeply gloomy and often literal foray into industrial music – many samples were taken from building sites – which touched upon nuclear anxieties, political disillusionment and general frustrations at Thatcher's Britain. Even the nursery rhyme melodies of brilliant Top 10 single *Everything Counts* were accompanied by a thinly veiled attack against the music industry ("The grabbing hands grab all they can").

At certain points – the deranged funfair outro of *More Than A Party*, the warped toy piano and unnerving metal clanging of *Pipeline* – suggests that Depeche Mode Version 2.0 got a little carried away with their newly-discovered instrument of choice, the Synclavier.

Still, world-weary opener *Love, In Itself* stands up with their early-80s best, while Wilder's environmental crusade, *The Landscape Is Changing*, showed they could also be thematically ahead of their time. Ultimately, *Construction Time Again* is another step towards their golden phase.

CONSTRUCTION TIME AGAIN
Released 1983
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.6 GER No.7

Rewarding Gareth Jones' previous efforts with an upgrade to co-producer, Depeche Mode's fourth album in as many years occasionally teased a return to their happier, shinier roots. Lead single *People Are People*, a buoyant anti-war diatribe that almost makes Culture Club's appear the height of subtlety ("So, we're different colours and we're different creeds/ And different people have different needs"), understandably gave the band their first hit in the States and remains their joint biggest in the UK and in West Germany, a country which had essentially become their second home – it even went all the way to No.1. The surging synth-pop of opener *Something To Do* could just as easily have graced *Speak & Spell*.

And while *Master And Servant*'s lyrical themes were strictly adults-only ("Domination's the name of the game/ In bed or in life, they're both just the

same"), the band were still, remarkably and infamously, invited to perform them on Saturday morning children's TV.

Still, at least they avoided scarring *Wide Awake Club* viewers for life with following single *Blasphemous Rumours*, the harrowing tale of a depressed teenager who, after surviving a suicide attempt, finds comfort in a new-found faith, only to die soon after in a car crash. Unsurprisingly, the track, again much peppier than the subject matter would suggest, didn't go down well in America's bible belt.

DEPECHE'S FOURTH ALBUM IN AS MANY YEARS OCCASIONALLY TEASED A RETURN TO THEIR HAPPIER, SHINIER ROOTS

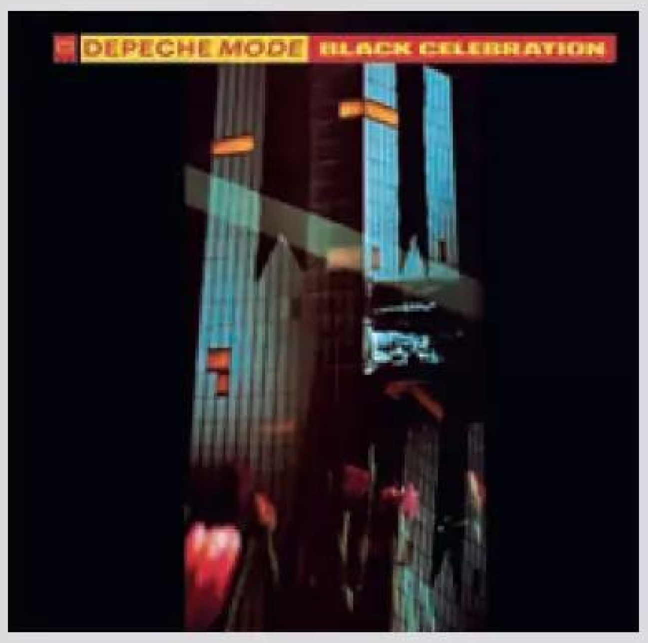
Returning to the same Hansa Mischraum recording studio which birthed David Bowie's acclaimed Berlin trilogy, the resulting *Some Great Reward* does occasionally sound as moody as the band looked.

Apparently recorded by Martin Gore entirely in his birthday suit, *Somebody* is a beautifully aching piano ballad that demonstrated Depeche Mode could still captivate without all the bells and whistles (or should that be whips and chains?).

It's a record, though, which seems tailor-made for their subsequent hits compilation: it's no coincidence that *Some Great Reward* is the most dominant album on *Singles 81-85*.

This is an all killer, no filler affair from a band audibly growing in confidence.

SOME GREAT REWARD
Released 1984
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.5 GER No.3



If Depeche thought they'd get an easier critical ride after closing the chapter on their more playful synth-pop era, *Black Celebration*'s reception suggested otherwise. "Pussycats desperate to appear perverted as an escape from the superficiality of teen stardom," wrote a scathing *Melody Maker*. Even Daniel Miller was unsure, his paraphrased reaction to the demos, *The Songs Aren't Good Enough, There Aren't Any Singles And It'll Never Get Played On The Radio*, adopted, ironically, as the title to the reissue's accompanying DVD.

Miller was made to eat his words when the record spawned three Top 30 singles, although to be fair none sounded like Mike Read-friendly fodder. There can't be many hits that borrow percussion from a running motorcycle engine à la *Stripped. A Question Of Lust*, meanwhile, is another warped love song, this time about sexual temptation. *A Question Of Time*, whose video sparked the symbiotic relationship with director Anton Corbijn, is an ambiguous *Lolita*-esque tale with a narrator that could be construed as both protective or predatory.

Ultra-commercial it may not have been – *Fly On The Windscreen* even opens with the cheery sentiment of "death is everywhere".

However, *Black Celebration*'s more committed dive into gloom pop, a key influence on Nine Inch Nails, was the catalyst for all that followed.

BLACK CELEBRATION
Released 1986
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.4 GER No.2

Depeche Mode's penchant for sardonic titles is also evident on their sixth album, a largely uncompromising affair seemingly designed not to cater for the masses but to actively alienate them. And yet in another irony, the record was embraced by US audiences more than anything that had gone before: it's their only one to spawn four Billboard hits and, by the end of its campaign, they were playing at the Pasadena Rose Bowl to a crowd of more than 60,000.

At times it's clearly apparent why *Music For The Masses* became their breakthrough on the other side of the pond. Opener *Never Let Me Down Again*, which recently enjoyed a second wind thanks to its use in *Euphoria* and *The Last Of Us*, is the sound of a band now ready to have super-sized stadium audiences in the palm of their hands. And there are shades of Cameo's electro-funk in *Strangelove*, a track which further helped reposition the previously gangly, gawky Gahan as a brooding sex symbol. Furthermore, with David Bascombe (Tears For Fears, Peter Gabriel) replacing regular cohort Daniel Miller as producer, the majority of its 10 tunes are richer, fuller and largely free of the peculiar samples that dominated the band's earlier work.

However, *Music For The Masses* also often doubled down on the idiosyncrasies that made Depeche Mode such an outlier. Closer *Pimpf*, for example, is a baroque instrumental complete with gothic chamber choir that sounds like it's been composed for a Satanic movie. *To Have And To Hold* is a gospel-tinged plea for salvation which opens with, what else, but a Russian radio broadcast. Inspired by composer Michael Nyman and a real-life relationship between a schoolboy and a middle-aged housewife, *Little 15* adds to their canon of disaffected teen anthems. It's also hard to see how Middle America took to *Nothing*, a meditation on the non-existence of God.

ALTHOUGH THEIR FANBASE MIGHT NOT HAVE THOUGHT SO AT THE TIME, IT'S THE START OF THE BAND'S IMPERIAL PHASE

Yet like all the great Depeche Mode records, this album thrives on its contradictions. Although their homegrown fanbase might not have thought so at the time – it remains their joint-lowest charting UK entry – it's also the true start of the band's imperial phase.

MUSIC FOR THE MASSES
Released 1987
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.10 US No.35

There was a certain symmetry to the appointment of Flood as producer of Depeche Mode's seventh album. The man born Mark Ellis had previously worked with founding member Vince Clarke on Erasure's debut *Wonderland* and commercial breakthrough *The Circus* along with the band's most obvious descendant, Nine Inch Nails, on the seminal *Pretty Hate Machine*. A natural candidate, therefore, to mastermind *Violator*'s combination of intelligent pop hooks and guilt-ridden, gothic gloom.

Flood inspired a markedly different approach to recording, with the band heading into his Worldwide Studios with only a basic idea of how the album would turn out. This fresher, more spontaneous method undoubtedly peaked with *Enjoy The Silence*, initially a sombre ballad which, with some New Age chorals and New Order-esque basslines, Alan Wilder helped transform into one of the all-time synth-pop greats. The

Best British Single winner at the 1991 BRIT Awards – remarkably the only time the group has ever triumphed at the ceremony – also became their sole US Top 10 hit. Of course, it wasn't *Violator*'s only enduring classic.

Influenced by Priscilla Presley's memoir of all things, the sleazy glam blues of *Personal Jesus* clearly showed Depeche Mode could be just as magnetic when they (shock horror!) picked up guitars. Indeed, channelling his inner evangelical preacher, Dave Gahan has never sounded more fervent than while imploring his congregation to "reach out and touch faith." Johnny Cash, Marilyn Manson and Jamelia are just a few of the eclectic names who've since worshipped at its altar.

DAVE GAHAN HAS NEVER SOUNDED MORE FERVENT THAN IMPLORING HIS CONGREGATION TO "REACH OUT AND TOUCH FAITH"

But the group's commercial zenith – it sold a million copies in the Unites States alone – has plenty to offer outside its two chart juggernauts: the uncharacteristically positive breakbeat of opener *World In My Eyes*, for one, the contrastingly mournful balladry of *Waiting For The Night* for another. *Policy Of Truth*, meanwhile, is quite possibly the funkiest that Depeche Mode have ever sounded.

On a more sobering note, *Clean*, an electro-classical number inspired by early Pink Floyd, and the industrial pop of *Sweetest Perfection* both appeared to hint at the drug-addled darkness that lay ahead. Still, *Violator* remains one of those rare instances when a band's biggest album is also their best.

VIOLATOR
Released 1990
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.2 US No.7

The seven seconds of howling feedback that kickstart album eight confirmed that Depeche Mode weren't going to let all the millions of sales, chart hits and awards compromise their sound. *Songs Of Faith And Devotion* is their heaviest-sounding record, no doubt a response to the Seattle scene that had made many other British bands seem redundant in the three years since their last.

Topping the charts on both sides of the Atlantic – their only album to do so – *Songs...* isn't a grunge record per se. We can't remember *Nevermind* containing any Uilleann pipes, as played by Irishman Steáfán Hannigan on the New Age atmospherics of *Judas*. Even so, it was certainly informed by happenings in the Emerald City, and Dave Gahan's regular hangouts with Jane's Addiction and Soundgarden.

Lead single *I Feel You* comes off as *Personal Jesus*' swampier cousin, blending its blues riffs with alt-rock beats and a desperate-sounding Gahan delivering a sonnet as if it was a sermon. They also throw guitars into the mix on the menacing funk rock of *Mercy In You*.

It's also a claustrophobic listen, no doubt resulting from the eight months spent holed up in a Madrid villa fine-tuning its amped up direction. "Like pulling teeth," said returning co-producer Flood about the experience, one which ultimately contributed to Alan Wilder's withdrawal from the band he'd helped steer to success beyond their wildest dreams.

And while its predecessor hinted at Gahan's ongoing substance abuse issues, *Songs...* appears to make things far more explicit – "I surrender all control/ To the desire that consumes me whole," he croons on *Higher Love*, its psychedelic vibes further insinuating his state of euphoria has been chemically and not romantically induced. On the foreboding *Rush*, that high appears to have turned into the comedown ("Dropped my crutches and crawled on the floor for you").

Even intimate moments are steeped in despair. See the hymnal *Condemnation* in which Gahan pushes himself to near-breaking point, or *One Caress*, a plea for salvation. *Songs Of Faith And Devotion* isn't always an easy listen. It is, however, another deeply powerful stride forward.

WHILE ITS PREDECESSOR HINTED AT GAHAN'S SUBSTANCE ABUSE, *SOFAD* MAKES THINGS MORE EXPLICIT

SONGS OF FAITH AND DEVOTION
Released 1993
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.1 US No.1

The tense recording of *Songs Of Faith And Devotion* was made to look like a walk in the park by the sessions that followed. In fact, it's a miracle *Ultra* that ever saw the light of day. Dave Gahan was reportedly so strung out on heroin that he was often neither use nor ornament – the pieced-together vocals on *Sister Of Night* was his only usable contribution from the band's six-week stint in New York's famous Electric Lady studios. And then, of course, the frontman was essentially declared dead for two minutes following an overdose at an L.A. hotel. Throw in the fact that Martin Gore came close to dismantling the band altogether and keeping all their new material for a solo venture, and it's even more remarkable how cohesive and consistently strong *Ultra*'s 11 songs (12 if you include hidden instrumental *Junior Painkiller*) are.

Opener *Barrel Of A Gun* immediately proved that Depeche Mode weren't going to shy away from all the drama. The unlikely, and surprisingly rare, Top 5 UK hit finds Gahan in wounded animal mode, practically howling about his descent into self-destruction. Its druggy promo video in which eyeballs are drawn onto his eyelids added to the intensity.

There's also a similar sense of self-loathing on *Useless*, whose spiky guitars suggest the group hadn't entirely let the Britpop scene pass them by, while *Freestate* finds Gahan psyching himself up to overcome his demons.

In other hands, the harrowing subject matter could have threatened to overwhelm the record. But new face, producer Tim Simenon of Bomb The Bass, who'd impressed the band with his work for Gavin Friday, ensured that *Ultra* was sonically compelling, too. The orchestral breakbeat of *Home* is arguably the band's finest Gore-sung number. *The Bottom Line* invites session musician legend B.J. Cole to help successfully meld steel guitar country with brooding trip-hop. There's even an unexpected concession to their lighter 80s material with the stylish electro-pop of *It's No Good*. And on a more optimistic note, *Insight* bookends the musical therapy session with a promise that Gahan has now learned from his past mistakes.

If there were still any doubts that Depeche Mode wouldn't survive into the new millennium, *Ultra* instantly quashed them.

OPENER *BARREL OF A GUN* IMMEDIATELY PROVED THAT DEPECHE MODE WEREN'T GOING TO SHY AWAY FROM THE DRAMA

ULTRA
Released 1997
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.1 US No.5

As with many of its predecessors, the sound of Depeche Mode's 10th LP didn't exactly mirror its title. *Exciter* is many things; a reflection of post-millennial anxiety, a blend of IDM, folktronica and ambient techno, the closest they have come to Radiohead's *Kid A*. Yet apart from the Grammy-nominated *I Feel Loved*, one of their most committed forays into club territory, and the lyrically questionable goth-metal of *The Dead Of Night* ("We're the horniest boys/ With the corniest ploys"), it's not the kind of record to get the adrenaline pumping.

Spearheaded by Mark Bell, best known as the founder of pioneering knob-twiddlers LFO, this more restrained new direction often works wonders: see the sublime lead single *Dream On*, a skittering ode to karmic retribution, and *When The Body Speaks*, described by Martin Gore to *Keyboard* magazine as "The Righteous Brothers playing next door to a rave." And no doubt there was barely a dry eye in the studio when Dave Gahan virtually whispered his way through *Goodnight Lovers*, a Velvet Underground-inspired lullaby dedicated to his two-year-old daughter.

The last entirely Gore-penned affair, *Exciter*'s occasional listlessness suggests it was about time he relinquished a little creative control. But overall, this detour into subdued waters proved they still had the power to pleasantly surprise.

EXCITER
Released 2001
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.9 US No.8

Perhaps buoyed by the positive response to his 2003 solo debut *Paper Monsters*, Dave Gahan was allowed three opportunities to showcase his songwriting abilities on Depeche Mode's return to grittier fare. The Grammy nomination given to *Suffer Well*, a propulsive reflection on his addiction struggles, was yet more validation his talents extended beyond that commanding baritone.

Also co-written with touring members Andrew Phillpott and Christian Eigner, the hissing electronica of *I Want It All* and atypical optimism of *Nothing's Impossible* further helped position *Playing The Angel* as the band's 21st century benchmark. But the album's two highlights appeared courtesy of their usual lynchpin and a 1930s gospel-blues standard.

The band's last UK Top 10 single, *Precious* also stands up as one of their most majestic, a gorgeously melancholic sequel to *Enjoy The Silence* in which Gore attempts to comfort his daughters in the wake of their parents' divorce ("Things get damaged/ things get broken").

And on *John The Revelator*, the same-named Blind Willie Johnson spiritual is transformed into a caustic electro-pop stomper brimming with condemnation for the abuse of religious powers. It's little wonder the band invited producer Ben Hillier (Blur, Elbow) back on two further two occasions.

PLAYING THE ANGEL
Released 2005
Label Mute/Reprise
Chart Positions UK No.6 US No.7

As foreshadowed by the tuned-up synth drone that kickstarts opener *In Chains*, *Sounds Of The Universe* saw Depeche Mode largely binning live instrumentation in favour of the analogue synth equipment they'd risen to fame with.

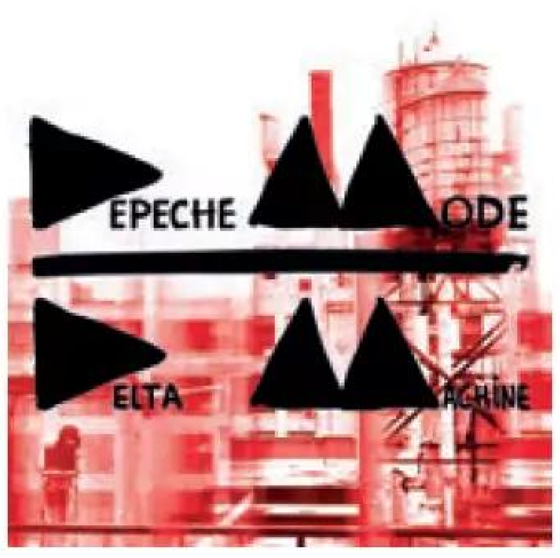
While the band's 12th studio effort occasionally gets a little too regressive – the playful hook on *Perfect* could easily have been lifted from their first album – it's a nostalgia trip which still finds the time to veer into more experimental directions.

The closest the record gets to fulfilling the brief of conjuring up images of space travel, *Come Back* is an impressively towering wall of IDM sound. Instrumental *Spacewalker* offers the kind of staccato R&B beats that established Timbaland as the decade's most innovative hitmaker.

And while *Peace* doesn't quite live up to Gore's claims that it's the best song he's ever written, it's a rather intriguing fusion of New Romanticism, gospel and Kraftwerk.

Clocking in over the hour mark, the group's longest studio album does slightly outstay its welcome, but *Sounds Of The Universe* is a solid balance between the old and the new.

SOUNDS OF THE UNIVERSE
Released 2008
Label Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.2
US No.3



Depeche Mode appeared to delve even further into the past on the final part of their Ben Hillier trilogy. They also reunited with their imperial phase's producer (this time around, Flood took on mixing duties), rescued a track from the *Songs Of Faith And Devotion* sessions (the sexually charged blues of *Slow*) and pretty much picked up where VCMG – the instrumental side project which saw Martin Gore join forces with Vince Clarke for the first time in three decades – left off.

Indeed, much of *Delta Machine* resembles the squelchy electronics and industrial whirring of the duo's *Ssss* album, only with added lyrical themes of darkness and despair. On occasions, there's a sense of treading water. Did we really need another doomy synth-pop number alluding to Gahan's substance abuse (*Should Be Higher*)? That said, the rhythmic call-and-response of *Secret To The End*, the menacing dub techno of *Alone* and lead single *Heaven*, an alternative Bond theme Gahan cited as one of the reasons he still makes music, made it clear the machine was still in generally rude health.

DELTA MACHINE
Released 2013
Label
Columbia/Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.2
US No.6

An album of many landmarks, *Spirit* was Depeche Mode's first to contain a profanity (*Fail*), feature a Gahan/Gore co-write (the industrial sleaze of *You Move*) and, perhaps most significantly, venture beyond their usual world of sin, sex and salvation.

Indeed, disillusioned with Brexit, Trumpism and the rise of the alt-right whose leader Richard Spencer, to their horror, had appointed them as the movement's official band, it was time to lay down their manifesto.

Its sentiments might have been political 101 ("Corporations get the breaks/ Keeping almost everything they make" on *Poorman* the most blatant example of stating the obvious). But with Gahan at his rabble-rousing best on the protest march of *Where's The Revolution* and environmental rally cry *The Worst Crime*, it was still hard not to get swept up in the fervour. The Brian Eno-esque *Cover Me* and theatrical balladry of *Eternal*, meanwhile, confirmed that Depeche were still compelling when they weren't putting the world to rights.

SPIRIT
Released 2017
Label
Columbia/Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.5
US No.5

As you would expect, Depeche Mode's first album since the death of founding member Andy Fletcher in 2022 was preoccupied with mortality (its title, "Remember, you must die," was selected before the sudden loss). Lead single *Ghosts Again* opines on the prospects of an afterlife. The ethereal *Wagging Tongues* features the refrain "Watch an angel die", while eerie showtune *Soul With Me* essentially serves as the group's answer to *My Way*. Producer James Ford, surprised at being invited back after the tense recording of its predecessor, ensures *Momento Mori* offers some light to go with its understandable shade, notably on the stunning Röyksopp-esque *Before We Drown* and curious *Caroline's Monkey*, one of four tracks co-written by The Psychedelic Furs' Richard Butler.

Gahan and Gore considered putting the band to bed before having second thoughts. *Momento Mori* showed that even at a combined age of 123, the Mode are still a vital force to be reckoned with.

MEMENTO MORI
Released
2023
Label
Columbia/Mute
Chart Positions
UK No.2
US No.14

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BMG

STARS ON 45

AS UB40 CELEBRATE 45 YEARS OF NOT HAVING TO SIGN ON, ROBIN CAMPBELL AND JIMMY BROWN TELL *CLASSIC POP* WHY THEY'RE STILL A BAND OF BROTHERS – JUST NOT WITH *THAT* BROTHER…

PAUL KIRKLEY

For a band that famously took its name from a jobseeker's benefit form, UB40 has been keeping its members in gainful employment for some 45 years now.

"It's a lifetime, isn't it?" says Robin Campbell, guitarist and de-facto spokesman for the world's biggest-selling reggae group. "You look back and wonder where it's all gone. But I guess that's how everyone thinks when they become… senior."

"It's all a bit of a marijuana-induced haze, to be honest," adds the band's drummer James 'Jimmy' Brown, with a throaty cackle.

"They've been mostly glorious, those years," reflects Robin, when *Classic Pop* meets him and Jimmy to mark the milestone birthday. "Of course there've been ups and downs. We've had some trauma, and we're still going through it. Our ex-singer is still a thorn in our side." (More – *much* more – on that later.) "But on the whole it's been incredible. I constantly pinch myself that I've had the life I've had, and the career we've had."

The band – which also includes fellow founding members Earl Falconer on bass and percussionist Norman Hassan – has been marking the anniversary with tours of the US and Europe, while putting the finishing touches to a new studio album, *UB45* (see boxout) – their first with Matt Doyle, the singer recruited two years ago following Duncan Campbell's retirement after a stroke.

UB40 celebrated 45 years in the music biz fronted by new singer Matt Doyle (third from left) with a homecoming show at Birmingham's Moseley Park & Pool this August

© Radskiphoto

As frontman of fellow Birmingham reggae outfit KIOKO, Doyle had previously supported UB40 on tour. "He's a really good singer, and a massive UB40 fan," says Robin. "So when my younger brother retired, I thought, 'This kid is perfect – why should we go looking elsewhere?' Matt jumped at the idea, but he was like a rabbit in the headlights when he started because it was such a big job, more than he could have dreamed of. But he's settled in fantastic."

Another highlight of the band's 45th birthday celebrations *ought* to have been their induction into the Music Hall Of Fame during September's Camden Music Festival. But things didn't quite go to plan…

"It was going to be a great day – until we found out the selection committee had Ali's manager on it," sighs Robin. Ali, of course, being the band's original singer – and Robin's kid brother – who jumped ship in 2008, and now tours with his own rival operation under the banner UB40 Live Featuring Ali Campbell.

"That set off some alarm bells," says Robin. "So we decided not to attend, because we knew [Ali] had an album and a tour to promote. We're faintly stunned that he turns up to things like this, when he left the band 15 years ago to pursue a solo career. It's just a very strange thing to do – to turn up to accept an award for a band you've left. We didn't want any part of that."

(A spokesperson for the Music Walk Of Fame told *Classic Pop* that while Trinifold Management, who represent Ali, *are* on the committee, they are not involved in the selection process.)

Media coverage of the day – in which Ali posed on the red carpet with the stone that's been laid into the pavement in the band's honour – included excitable talk of a possible rapprochement. But, frankly, that seems about as likely as a Pink Floyd or Oasis reunion.

"That reunion chat is bullshit," says Robin, bluntly. "It was all put about to help sell Ali's tour. There's no reunion, never was one, never will be." So much for reggae being the sound of peace, love and unity…

MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

For those who aren't fully across UB40 politics, Ali quit the group in 2008, citing "management and business disputes". He was later joined in his rival splinter group by long-standing rapper/toaster Terence 'Astro' Wilson and keyboardist Micky Virtue, but the latter left in 2018, and Astro died after a short illness in 2021.

"He calls himself UB40 Featuring Ali Campbell, but there isn't one member of UB40 in that band, other than him," says Robin. "The four original founding members of UB40 are still in our band. That's the glue that keeps us together. That's the ethos of the band. And Ali didn't want that any more. He wanted a bigger share."

"We tried to pin him down in the courts," says Jimmy, of their estranged singer's continued use of the UB40 handle. "But it's a really hard thing to do. He's not breaking any laws. It's a no-win situation."

But no one's getting any younger, says *Classic Pop*. With saxophonist Brian Travers, who died of cancer in 2021, and Astro both now

gone, and Duncan not in the best of health... isn't life too short for all this bitterness and acrimony?

"The thing is, Ali left," says Robin. "And he has not spoken one word to anyone in the band – all of whom considered him to be one of their best friends – since that day. People have portrayed it as a feud between brothers. But there was no fall-out between me and him. He left to go solo, and there was nothing we could do about that, except carry on.

"When he left, he left Birmingham, he left his family. So this idea of 'Let bygones be bygones...', it's not going to happen. He made that decision and he's got to live with it."

Isn't it especially painful for Robin, though? We're talking about his own flesh and blood, after all. "It may have hurt originally," he says. "But I'm over it now."

"We're quite happy with where we are," says Jimmy. "We're doing sold-out arena tours all over the world, we're having a good time. It was 15 years ago – we'd be living in the past if he was constantly on our minds."

Talking to *Classic Pop* in 2018, an equally forthright Ali insisted UB40 was, "my band and my brand." Jimmy's having none of it. "I'm an original member," he says. "We started it together. Rob was there, Earl, Norman, Brian... we were all at school together. And we had a philosophy of equality in the band. A lot of bands are a singer and a songwriter and they get all the money, while the drummer and the bass player get wages. That wasn't us. We were a band of brothers. We did it together."

COVERED IN GLORY

The band came together in Birmingham as a reggae-loving 'rainbow of nations' in 1978, with founding members boasting English, Irish, Welsh, Jamaican, Scottish and Yemeni heritage.

"We all saw Bob Marley in Birmingham in '76 – I think everyone in the band was at that gig," recalls Robin. "That was the catalyst. That was when everybody started to talk about this seriously, rather than it just being some pipe dream."

Their debut single, 1980's double A-side *King/Food For Thought*, earned them a UK Top 5 hit, but it was their 1983 covers album *Labour Of Love* that sent UB40 stratospheric, with their take on Neil Diamond's *Red Red Wine* – or, more accurately, their take on Tony Tribe's 1969 reggae version of *Red Red Wine* – topping the charts in seven countries, including the UK and in the US. (The single was re-released in the States and made No.1 in 1988 after a performance at the Nelson Mandela 70th Birthday Concert at Wembley resumed US airplay.)

It set a pattern for the future, in which all three of the band's UK chart-toppers, and four of their five US Top 10 singles, were covers, including their pop-reggae version of *(I Can't Help) Falling In Love With You*, which spent a whopping seven weeks at Billboard No.1.

With 70 million record sales, UB40 are comfortably the world's most successful reggae group, while their joint record-breaking tally of 214 weeks on the UK singles chart during the 80s is a feat matched only by Madness.

Nearly half a century on, the band still live in the Midlands, and are about to move their HQ back into Birmingham at the invitation of Steven '*Peaky Blinders*' Knight, who is in the process of developing an ambitious new creative hub for the city.

"Birmingham is in our blood – it makes us what we are and informs everything we do," says Jimmy, of their collective resistance to joining the celebrity republic of north London. "If we came from anywhere else, we'd be a different band."

Higher Ground: UB40 pose backstage at the Poplar Creek Music Theater, Hoffman Estates, Illinois, while on tour in September 1984

© Getty/Paul Natkin

Personal politics aside, Robin says they're honoured by the Music Hall of Fame accolade. "And the same thing's happening in Birmingham – they're laying a Walk Of Fame star for us in the city centre. I'm not going to tell you the date, because Ali will turn up!" he laughs. "But it's great, because it means when we're all dead and buried, we'll still be remembered."

Fortunately, it seems there's still plenty of life in UB40 yet: next year, the band will play a series of UK arenas with special guests Soul II Soul. "We've known them a long time," says Robin. "I holidayed in Barbados with Jazzie B 30-odd years ago. We didn't go *on* holiday together. We just turned out to be in the villas next door to each other!"

"I think there are a lot of similarities," reflects Jimmy. "We're more 80s, they're more 90s, but it's all dance music influenced by black British culture."

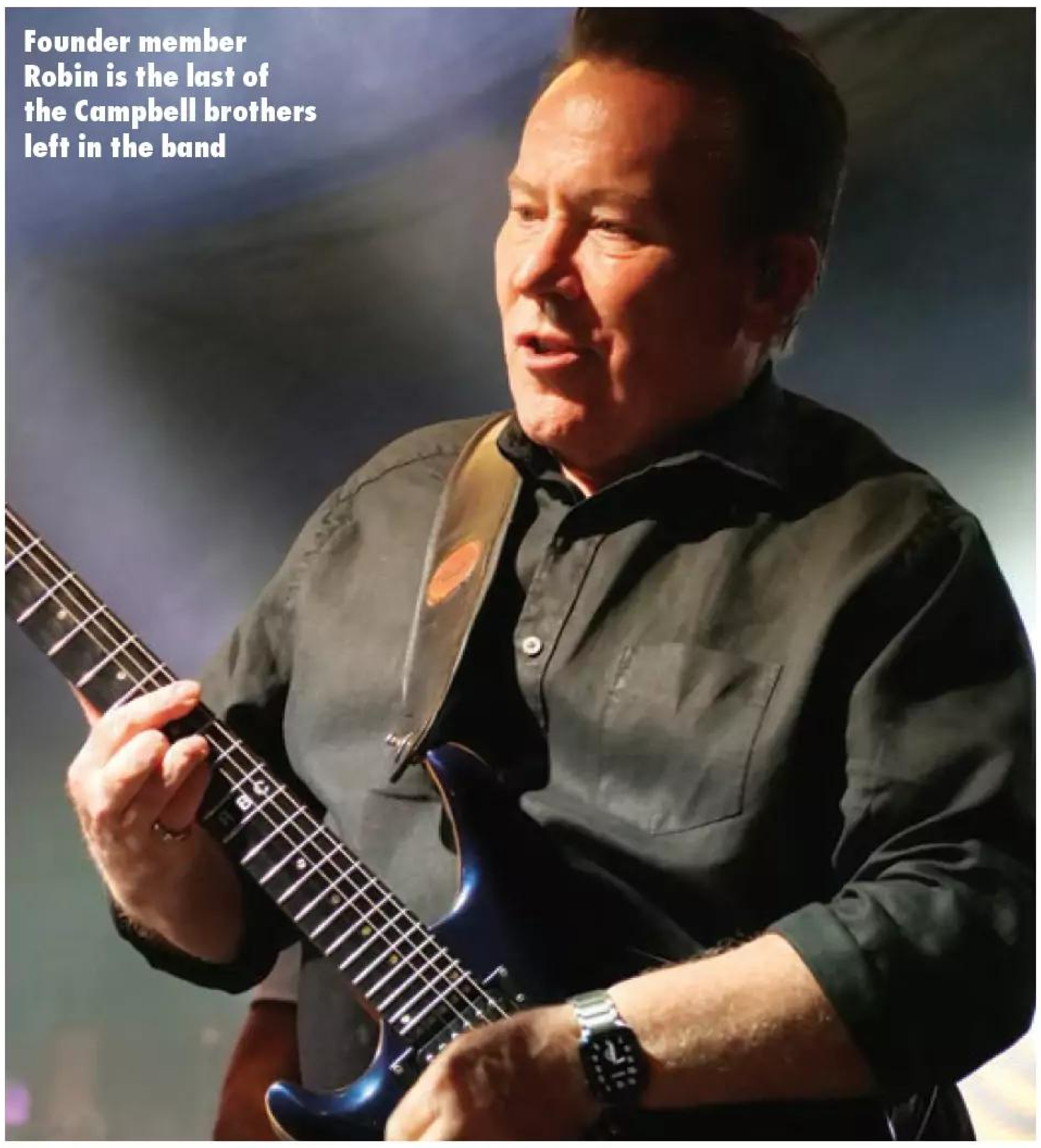
And beyond that? Having made it this far, Robin, 68, and Jimmy, 65, are optimistic about their chances of celebrating their 50th anniversary together. "We've got our

Ali Campbell split from the UB40 mothership in 2008 and has since formed his own splinter group

© Alex Barron Hough

"WE ALL SAW BOB MARLEY IN '76 – I THINK EVERYONE IN THE BAND WAS AT THAT GIG. THAT WAS THE CATALYST."

ROBIN CAMPBELL



Founder member Robin is the last of the Campbell brothers left in the band

© Dave Freak

fingers crossed," says Jimmy. "We're all feeling okay, and we're still enjoying playing together."

"We've had a ball and, unbelievably, we're still having a ball," agrees Robin. "We're probably enjoying it more than we have in a long time. That's the truth of it. And it's fantastic that we can still go to any corner of the globe and fill arenas (as, to be fair, can Ali's band – there seems to be an almost insatiable appetite for the music of UB40). The fact we could go on for another five or 10 years, I find hilarious. But as long as we can, I'm up for it."

"We're not like a lot of other bands, in that we actually like each other," smiles Jimmy. "We like spending time with each other. We're like those old guys you see in the corner of the pub, playing dominoes and cards."

"You've got to remember, we took our social circle on the road," remembers Robin. "We were a gang of mates from childhood, and we took that gang on the road. Even the crew were members of our gang. And that's the way we have done this business for 40-odd years. That's how we are. We're still a bunch of mates on the road together, having a good time." ■

● UB40 tour the UK with special guests Soul II Soul from November 2024 – tickets are available from premier.ticketek.co.uk. *UB45* is out early next year. Read our UB40 live review on page 92.

ON THE RECORD

UB40's upcoming 21st studio album *UB45* – see what they've done there? – was originally intended to be all new material, explains Robin. "But then someone suggested we should re-record some of the classics. We thought it would be good to show people how good Matt (pictured below) is at singing *Kingston Town*, *Food For Thought* and *Red Red Wine* etc. So that's half the album, and the other half is new songs."

"It surprised me, to be honest, how good the new songs sound," admits Jimmy. "Because we'd lost Brian, and he was the most prolific songwriter [in the band]. So there was a bit of an empty space there, and we weren't sure how it was going to be filled. But the songs came together really easily."

"Matt sings the old songs beautifully, but he's also full of youth and vigour and enthusiasm," says Robin. "It invigorates you, getting younger members in – our keyboard player Jahred [recent Jamaican recruit Jahred Gordon] is another one. We're gathering youth as we go."

When it comes to the album's title, the band have previous form: their third LP, from 1982, was called *UB44*, in honour of being their, er, fourth album (but only if you count 1981's remix set, *Present Arms In Dub*). Then, six years later, they named their eighth album… *UB40*. For reasons that presumably made sense at the time.

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CLASSIC POP TOP TEN

WEEK ENDING 16 NOVEMBER 1985

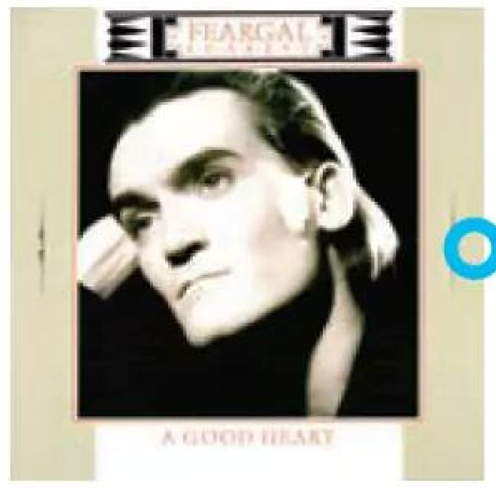
SMOOTH SOUL, POP CLASSICS FROM ELTON AND LEVEL 42, WHISPERS IN THE MORNING – AND ONE OF THE BEST-LOOKING MEN IN THE WORLD…

STEVE O'BRIEN

▲ 01 (4) **A GOOD HEART**
FEARGAL SHARKEY
(VIRGIN)

▼ 02 (1) **THE POWER OF LOVE**
JENNIFER RUSH
(CBS)

A GOOD HEART
FEARGAL SHARKEY (VIRGIN)



Who would have thought, just seven years before, that the snotty, anorak-clad punk that was spitting out *Teenage Kicks* on *Top Of The Pops* would one day be a designer-suited pop star, warbling one of the smoothest soul numbers of the 80s. Written by then-Lone Justice singer Maria McKee about her relationship with Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers keyboardist Benmont Tench, and produced by Dave Stewart (the Eurythmics one), *A Good Heart* was Sharkey's third single, and the first to break Top 20. It would, however, be the Ulsterman's only No.1 and by the early 90s, he'd largely retired from performing, joining Polydor Records as an A&R man. By 2008, his career had evolved to become CEO of UK Music, the umbrella organisation that represents the interests of the production side of the country's music industry.

NIKITA
ELTON JOHN
(ROCKET)

Elton John's list of hits is so voluminous that he could afford to not include this UK No.3 in his recent Glastonbury setlist. Released as the lead single from his 19th studio album, *Ice On Fire*, *Nikita* features backing vocals from George Michael and guitar courtesy of Nik Kershaw. Whether or not Elton was singing about a man or a woman (though Nikita is a feminine name in most of the world, it can be a male name in Russia) was left thrillingly unexplained. However, the accompanying Ken Russell-directed video was less ambiguous, depicting Nikita as a sexy Russian border guard, portrayed by actor and model Anya Major, who'd played the hammer thrower in the famous *Nineteen Eighty-Four*-influenced TV commercial for Apple.

THE POWER OF LOVE
JENNIFER RUSH (CBS)

Not *that Power Of Love (FGTH)* or *that Power Of Love* (Huey Lewis & The News), but *this Power Of Love*, Jennifer Rush's only chart-topper this side of the pond. Recorded in Frankfurt for the American singer's eponymous 1984 album, it would hit No.1 across the globe, from Australia and Norway to Canada and South Africa (though not, bizarrely, in her native US, where it stalled at No.57). The song was the first ever million-seller by a female solo artist in the UK and the biggest-selling single of 1985. It's since been covered by Air Supply, Laura Branigan and Celine Dion, whose 1994 version would become the best-selling single by a female artist in the US that year.

TAKE ON ME
A-HA (WARNER BROS)

Take On Me's origins hark back to Pål Waaktaar's and Magne Furuholmen's previous band Bridges, and a track the teenagers named *The Juicy Fruit Song*. Reworked into *Take On Me*, the group released their first version of it, produced by Tony Mansfield, in 1984, charting in their native Norway, but nowhere else. The beefier Alan Tarney-helmed incarnation, recorded for their debut album, *Hunting High And Low*, would prove far more popular, hitting No.1 on the US Billboard chart and peaking at No.2 in Blighty. In the book *I Want My MTV*, Warner Bros' Jeff Ayeroff said of it: "I fell in love with the song. Then I saw a picture of the band, and it was like, 'do people actually look like this?' Morten Harket was one of the best-looking men in the world."

03 (2) **TAKE ON ME**
A-HA
(WARNER BROS)

04 (3) **NIKITA**
ELTON JOHN
(ROCKET)

05 (7) **DON'T BREAK MY HEART**
UB40
(DEP INTERNATIONAL)

06 (6) **SOMETHING ABOUT YOU**
LEVEL 42
(POLYDOR)

07 (5) **TRAPPED**
COLONEL ABRAMS
(MCA)

08 (16) **STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN**
FAR CORPORATION
(ARISTA)

09 (-) **ONE VISION**
QUEEN
(EMI)

10 (18) **SISTERS ARE DOIN' IT FOR THEMSELVES**
EURYTHMICS AND ARETHA FRANKLIN
(RCA)

DON'T BREAK MY HEART
UB40
(DEP INTERNATIONAL)

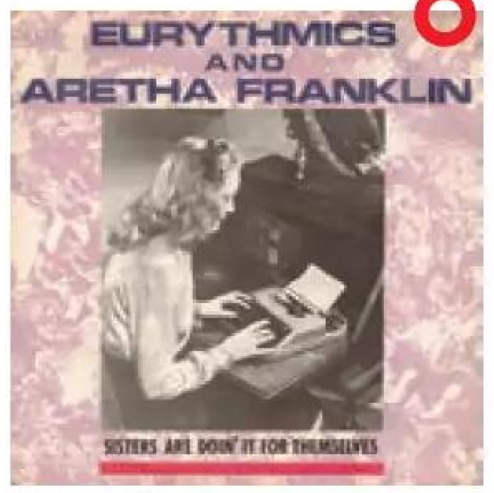
One of the Birmingham boys' biggest hits and a *Classic Pop* favourite. The song derived from the band's sixth album, *Baggariddim*, and was the LP's second single after the Chrissie Hynde-guesting *I Got You Babe*. The album was mostly made up of reworkings of songs that originally appeared on 1983's *Labour Of Love* and 1984's *Geffery Morgan* long-players, here showcasing various guest vocalists and toasters (Pato Banton and Dillinger, among them). *Don't Break My Heart* would peak at No.3 in the UK with its parent album reaching a chart high of No.14.

TRAPPED
COLONEL ABRAMS
(MCA)

Aside from the No.24-charting *I'm Not Going To Let You*, *Trapped* was Colonel Abrams' sole UK hit. Somewhat surprisingly he *was* a real Colonel, just not a military one, having been born with that name in 1949 (possibly in that year anyway, sources vary). In 1976, he formed the band 94 East, which boasted a teenage Prince on lead guitar, though sadly Abrams' career would fail to equal the Purple One's. His debut album, *Colonel Abrams*, peaked at a lowly No.75 in the US and his three subsequent LPs disappeared without trace. By 2015, he was homeless, and passed away on Thanksgiving the following year.

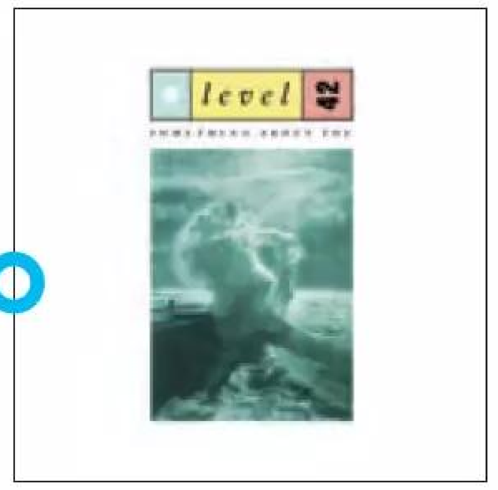
ONE VISION
QUEEN
(EMI)

Influenced by the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr, *One Vision* was largely conceived by drummer Roger Taylor but credited to all four members of Queen. The opening song for all of 1986's Magic Tour, the single would peak at No.7 in the UK and No.5 in Ireland but mystifyingly just missed the Top 60 in the US.



SISTERS ARE DOIN' IT FOR THEMSELVES
EURYTHMICS AND ARETHA FRANKLIN
(RCA)

Written by Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart, *Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves* was intended as a duet with Tina Turner. With Tina unavailable, the pair recorded with Aretha instead. Three of Tom Petty's Heartbreakers feature, too.



SOMETHING ABOUT YOU
LEVEL 42
(POLYDOR)

Released as the lead single from Level 42's sixth album *World Machine*, *Something About You* remains one of the band's most popular songs, peaking at No.6 in the UK. The music video was helmed by Stuart Orme, a director who also collaborated with the guys on the *Lessons In Love* and *Running In The Family* promos and who has now moved into TV, with credits including such programmes as *Doc Martin*, *Merlin* and *Lewis*. Look out for an appearance in the video from Cherie Lunghi, famous for her role as Guinevere in the 1981 film *Excalibur*.

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN
FAR CORPORATION
(ARISTA)

There seems little point in covers of classic songs that sound like carbon copies of the original. So it is with Far Corporation's way-too-reverent take on Led Zeppelin's 1971 rock masterpiece. The band was the brainchild of German record producer Frank Farian, the mastermind, if you want to call him that, behind Boney M. and Milli Vanilli. Though it's a fairly forgettable cover, their version did make history, as it was the first time that the song had charted, as Led Zep had never released the original as a single. The companion album, *Division One*, also included a cover of Free's *Fire And Water*, with subsequent long-players delving into the back catalogues of Cockney Rebel and Steely Dan.

Eddy Grant pictured in 1982 during a shoot for his *Killer On The Rampage* album cover

A TRAILBLAZER SINCE THE MID-60S, EDDY GRANT IS ONE OF POP'S GREAT SURVIVORS. AS HE'S HONOURED BY THE CAMDEN MUSIC WALK OF FAME, THE SINGER-SONGWRITER REVEALS ALL ABOUT HIS NEAR-FATAL HEART ATTACK, TAKING ON DONALD TRUMP AND HOW HE'S BEEN UNAFRAID TO MAKE HITS OUT OF POLITICALLY-CHARGED SUBJECT MATTER...

STEVE O'BRIEN

MESSAGE MAN

At the dawn of the 70s, Eddy Grant, it seemed, had it all. There he was, a guy in his early twenties with a wife, a couple of sprogs, and a victorious career as lead guitarist and songwriter of The Equals, most famous for their chart-conquering hit, *Baby, Come Back*. He was almost the poster boy for clean living, proving that you didn't have to be a drug-chasing libertine to be a pop star in the 60s. If there was an anti-Keith Richards at the time, it was Eddy Grant.

Heart attacks aren't supposed to be on the agenda for teetotal, vegetarian, sports-loving twentysomethings, but on New Year's Eve 1971 that's exactly what happened to the man born Edmond Montague Grant when he found himself in intensive care, having suffered a massive coronary.

"Oh brother, it was brain shattering, heart shattering," the now 75-year-old and fighting fit Eddy Grant tells *Classic Pop*, over Zoom from his home in Barbados. "It stopped me dead and made me look at my life in a different way."

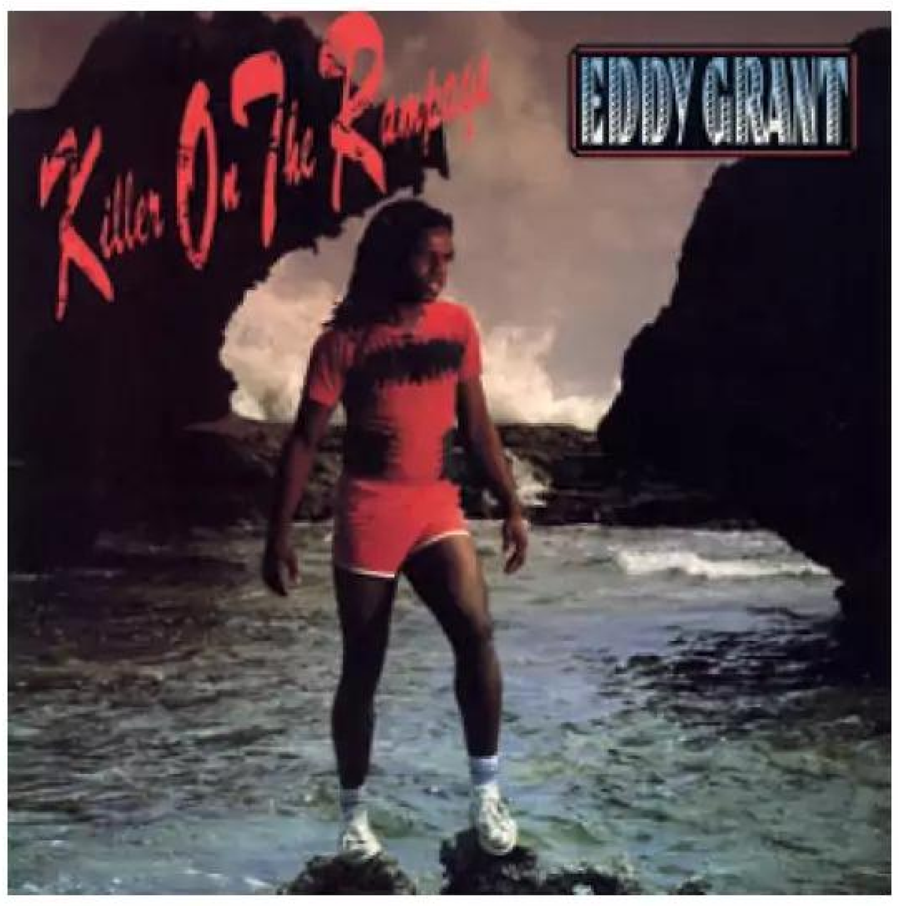
Little could he have known then, lying there in the ICU, that his greatest successes were still ahead of him. He'd chalked up a trinity of Top 10 hits with The Equals: (1968's aforementioned UK No.1 *Baby, Come Back*, 1969's *Viva Bobby Joe* and 1970's incendiary *Black Skin Blue Eyed Boys*, which was later covered by The Specials), but his biggest pop hits were still to come.

"When something goes wrong with your heart, you become this old man. Even walking to the bathroom is a pain," he says, wincing at the memory. "Your whole set of circumstances change and you have to slow down. You have to think about everything very carefully before you act."

Reluctantly, Eddy walked away from The Equals, the multi-racial rock-soul outfit he'd helped form in 1965 ("I tried to make an adjustment," he says, "and the adjustment couldn't be made within the context of the band"), taking 12 months off to let himself mend. For the next few years he wrote songs, produced other artists (The Pyramids, Prince Buster) and set up his own recording studio at his home in Hackney. In 1975, he finally released his debut solo album, the eponymous *Eddy Grant*. Except neither that, nor its fiery follow-up, 1977's *Message Man*, caught the public's eye. Then, in 1979, *Living On The Frontline* happened. Its heavily politicised lyrics set against thick slabs of chart-friendly synth proved irresistible, propelling it to No.11 in the UK.

There were occasional chart wins over the coming years (1980's *Do You Feel My Love*, 1981's *Can't Get Enough Of You*), but his following was largely confined to Africa and the Caribbean. That all changed with *I Don't Wanna Dance* and its parent LP, 1982's genre-hopping *Killer On The Rampage*.

"It seemed like everybody knew something was happening with that record," Grant says. Even his stonemason, a guy called Redman, sensed it was the big one. "He said to me, 'Boss, I don't know much about music, but that record's going to be No.1.' And it was, it was a whacking great hit for me."



ELECTRIC SHOCK

As seismic as *I Don't Wanna Dance* was over here, it didn't even break the Top 50 in the US. The song that made his name in the States was *Killer On The Rampage*'s follow-up, the crazily catchy *Electric Avenue*, which peaked at US No.2. But don't mention that chart placing to Eddy.

"I'm a positive person, I don't like to harp on about negative things," he says, "but to me, No.2 is negative. I mean, it was No.1 on Cashbox. People keep harping on about it being No.2 on the Billboard, but at the same time, it was No.1 in Cashbox. So I, being the positive guy that I am, I say *Electric Avenue* was top of the charts in the United States of America."

Forty years on, Grant admits that its success Stateside was bittersweet. While it was his first hit there (No.1 or No.2, you decide), DJs didn't seem interested in spinning anything else with his name on it.

"It ostensibly stopped my progress in the United States," he says regretfully. "Because remember, *I Don't Wanna Dance* was No.1 all over the world. And so I've got this now to deliver and the guys won't stop playing *Electric Avenue*, till today! I mean, *I Don't Wanna Dance*, every child and every 90-year-old can sing it. Never got a chance in the United States... so far."

For all of his music's infectious danceability, those songs have a sharp political bite. But while there's fire, there's also positivity. Just cock your ear to 1988's anti-apartheid-inspired *Gimme Hope Jo'anna*, which, as well as raging against the white South African government, also remains optimistic that change is on the horizon – democracy finally came to the rainbow nation in 1994.

"I'm absolutely a believer that music can change lots of things," he says. "What music can't do is force people to change. It's very difficult to bring about drastic social change, but you can create a greater sensibility and from that, little bits and pieces of social change can occur. *Gimme Hope Jo'anna* tickles people's imaginations that it's possible to change. That song was popular amongst white South Africans as well, so here you've got a song that is decrying apartheid and the very people who are executing this apartheid love it.

"A song is a very powerful thing if the message is right, the beat is right, and so many other things. It's not just words and it's not just music, it's a spiritual entity that floats around in the ether and every now and again it will land in some country and people will see its value. I mean, *Gimme Hope Jo'anna* was being played as the German National Football World Cup song! It became massive. Then Joe Allen came and got it for Wales. It's universal."

But if singles like *Gimme Hope Jo'anna* can be adopted by football clubs and sporting events (in 2017, *The Sun* modified its lyrics to support Brit tennis pro Johanna Konta at Wimbledon), his songs can also be appropriated by darker forces. In 2020, Donald J Trump used the track – without permission, natch – on an anti-Biden advert. Grant then sued the former President for copyright infringement, seeking $300,000 in damages. Another legal headache for The Donald.

"The matter is subjugate," he says cautiously, when we broach the subject. "But, yes, I did sue Donald Trump, and yes, it's in the courts, but Donald Trump knows how to circumnavigate issues. It's nothing personal. I don't hate Donald Trump, I don't hate anybody."

FUELLING THE FIRE

Like Trump, though, Eddy Grant is another septuagenarian with fire in his belly, even if the targets of their ire are very different. In 2006, Grant released *Reparation*, an album which called for restitution for the transatlantic slave trade. Asked what fuels his fury in 2023, it's not just the dire state of the world, but the fact that few artists are as politically engaged as he and his contemporaries were 40 years ago.

"They don't even write those kind of songs anymore," he says. "It's like writers have got writer's block when it comes to socially conscious lyrics because they can't get hits out of them. But I get hits with them all the time. I don't write them because of fashion, or to get a hit. My brother said to me on so many occasions, 'Why do you write those songs? The BBC won't play them!' But I don't write songs for the BBC. If they play them, fine, if they don't,

MEMORIES OF BRITAIN

Though he was born in Plaisance, British Guiana, in 1948, Eddy Grant moved to the UK in 1960. His parents had emigrated a few years earlier, working over here and sending money back to Guyana for their son's education. Arriving in Britain aged 12, Eddy initially lived with his parents in Kentish Town, going to school at the Acland Burghley Secondary Modern in Tufnell Park. He remembers his first impressions of the UK: "I just remember how dark it was even in the middle of the day," he laughs. "And the smell – England smelled different. I could say it smells nasty, but nasty is a relative term. Britain had just come out of the war, and it had been bombed to hell. People were just finding their feet and they're having to burn coal, which they've probably burned since the Middle Ages. All of these things have an impact on how one can describe England. The song *Jerusalem* perfectly describes it."

Grant created the 'Ringbang' genre, a fusion of Caribbean music, blending soca calypso, reggae, tuk, and zouk

"I'M ABSOLUTELY A BELIEVER THAT MUSIC CAN CHANGE LOTS OF THINGS. WHAT MUSIC CAN'T DO IS FORCE PEOPLE TO CHANGE."

Grant says his next solo album is already finished and ready to go

they don't – some generation will find them, like how I found *Johnny B Goode*. *Johnny B Goode* wasn't a hit in Guyana, it wasn't a hit in Trinidad or Barbados, nothing. Nobody in this part of the world really knows Chuck Berry. But where he's been needed, that's where he is."

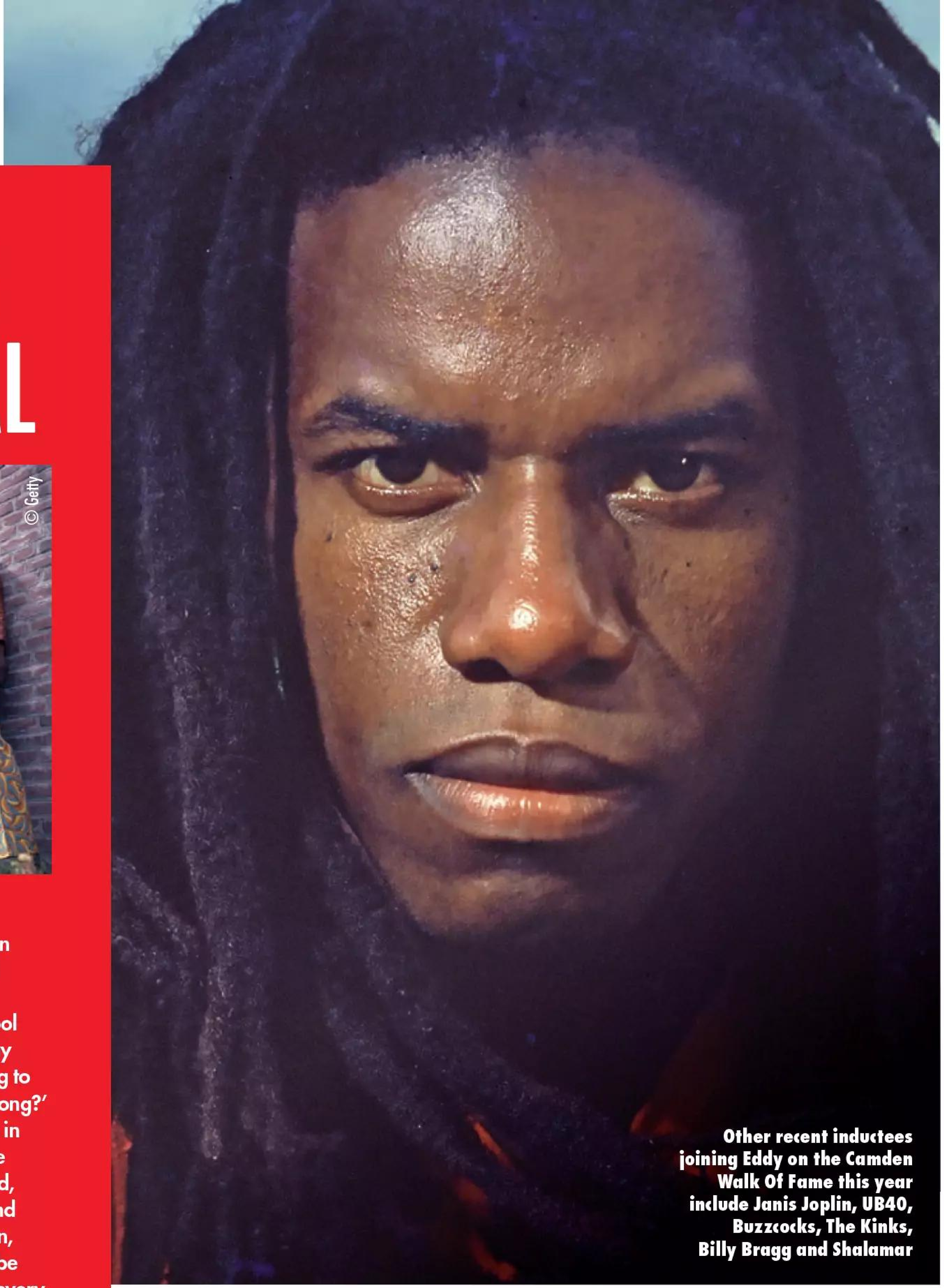
And it's fair to say that Britain needed Eddy Grant in the 80s, which is why the Camden Music Walk Of Fame recently honoured the Guyanese-born, Kentish Town-raised songwriter with a pavement plaque alongside other musical giants including UB40, The Sugarhill Gang, Buzzcocks, The Kinks and Shalamar.

"I lived there, I wrote there, I drove there, I became a man there," he told us, a few weeks before the ceremony. "Why would I not want to be recognised in history? Because it's all about history, it's all about what you've done. When you leave this world, and I'm 75 years old now, it's what you've done that counts, not who you are. Nobody in years to come will know Eddy Grant or Paul McCartney. Time erodes like the river erodes the bank. So yeah, there will be some general acknowledgement, but think about the billions of people that will come and go. As much as the stone will survive, I will survive."

FACING THE FUTURE

There's a sense in which an honour like the Camden Music Walk Of Fame is a punctuation mark that tells the world that an artist's best work is behind them. When some of us reach a certain age, death seems so much closer, but Eddy Grant first faced that fear 52 years ago and appears untroubled by thoughts of mortality.

"Whatever it is that God has for me in this world, he brings it to me," he says matter-of-factly. "I don't chase fame, I don't chase money... these things come to me. And if it doesn't come to me, then I reason that it's not good for me. With that, I have a number of things that I do. I love old buildings so I spend a lot of time



Other recent inductees joining Eddy on the Camden Walk Of Fame this year include Janis Joplin, UB40, Buzzcocks, The Kinks, Billy Bragg and Shalamar

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL

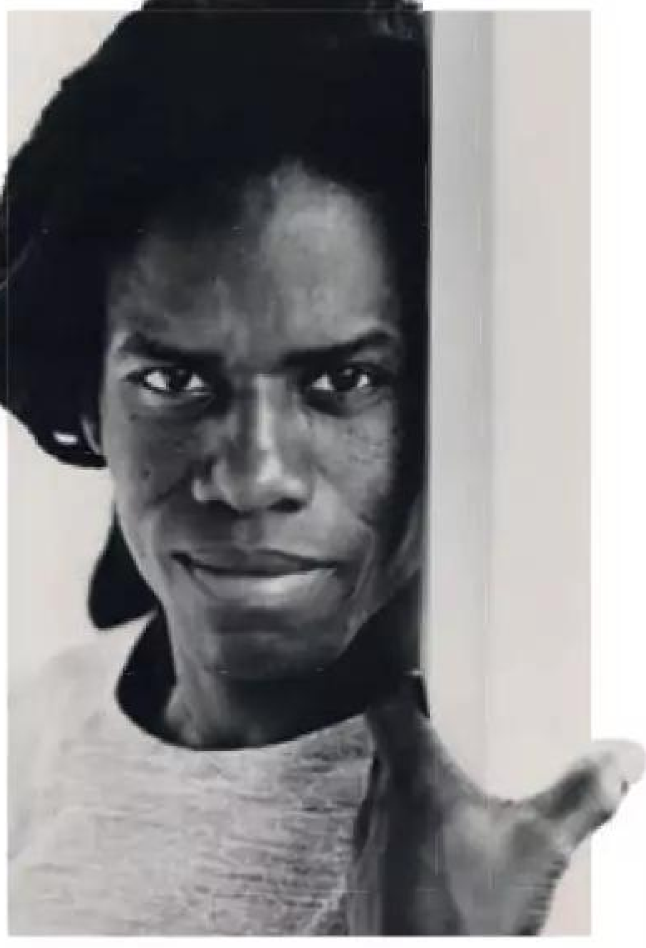
© Getty

Eddy formed The Equals in 1965 with drummer John Hall, vocalist Derv Gordon and two rhythm guitarists, Pat Lloyd and Lincoln Gordon.

"I'd started carrying my guitar to school and playing in lunch breaks, and one day one of the guys said, 'Listen, there's going to be a jam session, why don't you come along?' So I went up and met a whole lot of guys in John Hall's mum's front room and they're bashing out this and bashing out that and, well, I'm a guy who likes organisation and this was *not* organised. So I got with John, and I said, 'John, you really want this to be going on in the front room every day or every other day? Why don't we have a proper group?' and he said, 'Yeah, what should we call it? Why not The Equals?'"

Having three Black members and two white in a pop band was a radical thing in the mid-60s, and even naming the group The Equals was a forceful political act. "It wasn't just because of race," Grant explains, "but John said everyone had an equal vote. And I thought, 'well, it's as good a name as any.'"

"STREAMING IS RUBBISH. YOU HAVE TO DO, I DON'T KNOW, 500 MILLION DOWNLOADS BEFORE YOU CAN GET A WEEK'S WAGE."



fixing my home. I do things in Guyana and in England – it helps to make some mark on the earth or in the air – and as I'm doing these things, the songs come."

Grant's next album is, he claims, in the can. It's been six years since his last LP, the paean to his youth, *Plaisance* (named after the town where he was born in 1948), but he admits that his attention recently has been taken up with butting heads with Spotify and Apple Music. Grant hasn't allowed his albums onto any streaming services, describing the royalties paid to musicians as "rubbish".

"In streaming," he points out, "you have to do, I don't know, 500 million downloads before you can get a week's wage or something like that."

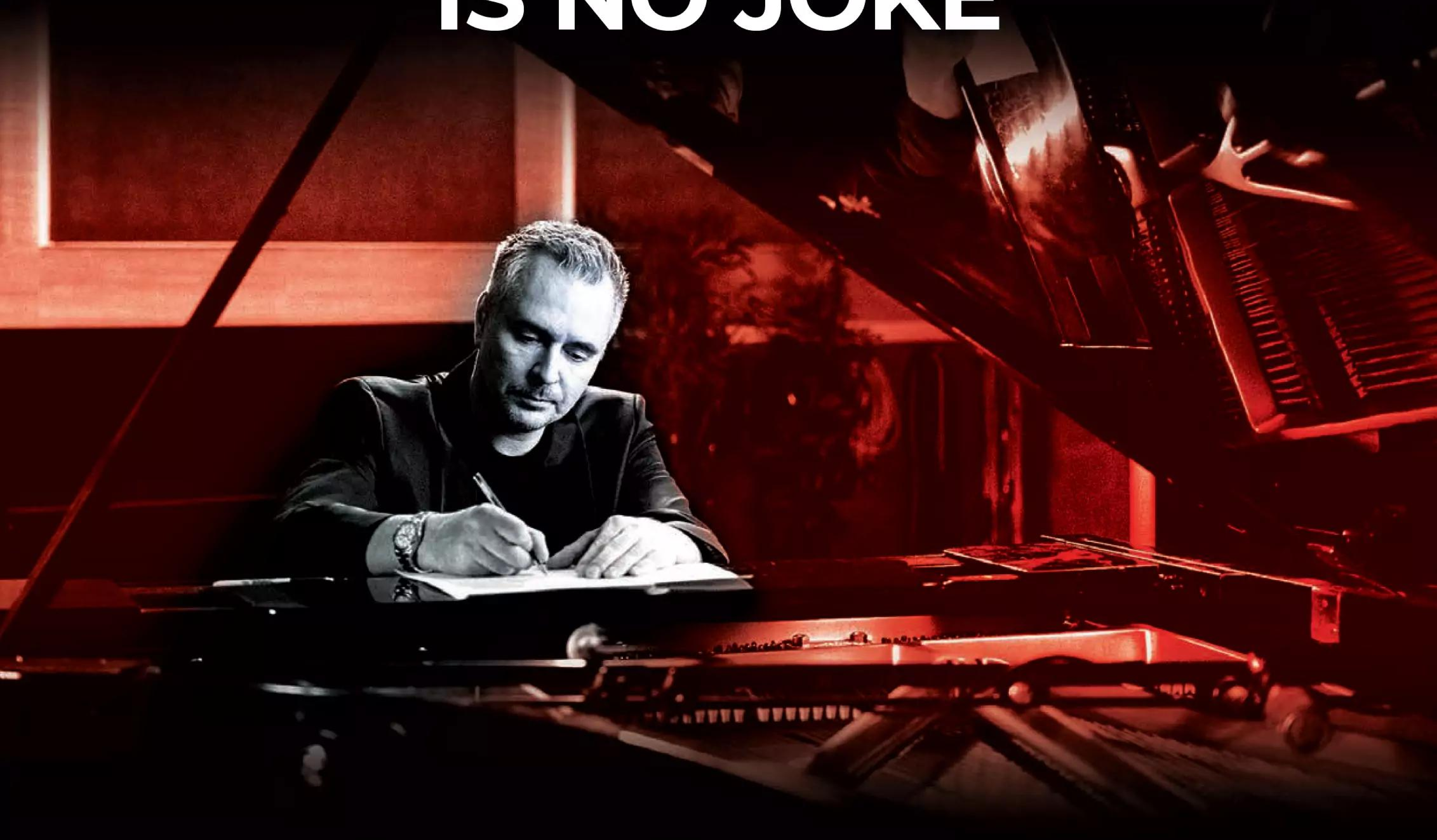
Though album number 17 is done and dusted, the singer says he's currently "waiting for the moment to launch it". Nearly 60 years into his career, Grant's passion for the power of song burns as white-hot as it did at the very beginning. Rewind six decades and, before the sounds of Chuck Berry stirred him to pick up a guitar, he'd planned to study medicine, so he "could do some good for people". Surely, we suggest, he's still ended up doing good for people, only as a musician, not a surgeon.

"Music is a great doctor," he beams. "It's probably a better doctor than the ones that go to university and study for seven years. Music cures, probably more things than the knife."

It's something heart attack survivor Eddy Grant knows only too well. Now 52 years on from his near-fatal coronary, he's a living example of the healing power of pop. ■

trickster

REAL CHANGE
IS NO JOKE



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FORGET ME NOTS

THE STYLE COUNCIL MODERNISM: A NEW DECADE

THE STYLE COUNCIL'S FIFTH AND FINAL STUDIO EFFORT *MODERNISM: A NEW DECADE* TOOK ON NEAR-MYTHICAL STATUS WHEN IT WAS SHELVED BY THE BAND'S LABEL JUST BEFORE ITS PLANNED 1989 RELEASE. SO WERE THE FEARS OVER THEIR SUDDEN SHIFT INTO DANCE MUSIC FOUNDED?

JON O'BRIEN

"I wasn't jumping around the room, which I think is probably a bad sign," Paul Weller remarked to *Uncut* about his initial response to the album that threatened to sink his career. It's fair to say The Style Council's label wasn't exactly leaping for joy either. Indeed, on hearing 1989's *Modernism: A New Decade*, appalled Polydor bosses decided they'd rather cut their losses than subject fans to the burgeoning movement known as deep house.

One might assume this was another case of record company narrow-mindedness. After all, those who'd followed Weller from The Jam had embraced everything from politicised Northern Soul and smooth sophisti-pop to languid R&B accompanied by the 80s most homoerotic video without barely batting an eyelid. Surely, some chunky Italo piano chords and four-to-the-floor beats wouldn't leave them recoiling in horror?

Well, the near-riots (okay, some programme-ripping and loud booing) that broke out during an infamous pre-release gig at the Royal Albert Hall suggests there was method to Polydor's apparent madness. Likewise, the lukewarm response to non-single *Promised Land*, a relatively faithful cover of Joe Smooth's house anthem. Following the underwhelming sales of 1988's *Confessions Of A Pop Group*, the band desperately needed a track that would restore them to former chart glories: instead, it limped in at a lowly No.27.

Of course, *Modernism* would eventually see the light of day in 1998, appearing on boxset *The Complete Adventures Of The Style Council*. But this was already nine years too late. Weller, alongside keyboardist Mick Talbot, vocalist Dee C. Lee and drummer Steve White, had taken the album's snubbing as a sign and immediately disbanded. "It's something we should have done two or three years ago," acknowledged Weller soon after to the *NME*. "We created some great music in our time, the effects of which won't be appreciated for some time."

More than three decades on and the band's fifth and final studio effort has still yet to receive such a re-evaluation. Yet there's enough moments of inspiration among its eight club-focused tracks to suggest one is long overdue. Indeed, far from the bandwagon-jumping embarrassment its reputation would leave you to believe, *Modernism* is an authentic love letter to a scene Weller had fully immersed himself in. It's full of bangers, too.

The more melodious efforts such as *The World Must Come Together* and *Sure Is Sure* evoke the soulful club classics of Blaze and Ten City. Despite clocking in at nearly nine minutes, *Love Of The World*'s euphoric production ensures it doesn't outstay its welcome. Meanwhile, *Hope (Feelings Gonna Getcha)* is a similarly uplifting blend of house piano chords, Balearic beats and anthemic chants which, bizarrely, foreshadow Tag Team's one-hit-wonder *Whoomp! (There It Is)*.

Admittedly, by limiting their frontman's vocal presence in favour of stuttering effects, lengthy instrumental passages and diva-like wailing, The Style Council risk sounding more like an anonymous producer than a fully formed band. At times, *Modernism* could be mistaken for the likes of C&C Music Factory, Black Box or any other late-80s studio team who substituted their powerhouse singers for fashion models Milli Vanilli-style.

However, *That Spiritual Feeling* hints that the record could have taken a very different path. Weller and Talbot had already toyed with its newly emerging sound for Eddie Piller and Gilles Peterson's aptly named Acid Jazz label, recording *Like A Gun* under the guise of King Truman: foreshadowing the drama that would later unfold,

Initially shelved by Polydor, *Modernism: A New Decade* would finally see the light of day in 1998

Polydor demanded a cancellation of its release just days before it was due to hit stores. And the seven-minute epic, the only time *Modernism* ventures outside its deep house remit, picks up where that left off. It's also the only cut which has survived into the solo Weller era with a virtually indistinguishable new mix appearing on the B-side to 1993 single *Sunflower.*

By this point, Weller was repositioning himself as the elder statesman of another musical movement, one far more rooted in nostalgia than anything forward-thinking. Ironically, Weller's pre-Britpop second LP, *Wild Wood*, was beaten to the Mercury Prize by M People's *Elegant Slumming*, a record that took the kind of house music explored on *Modernism* and watered it down for the supermarket crowd.

FAR FROM A BANDWAGON-JUMPING EMBARRASSMENT, *MODERNISM* IS A LOVE LETTER TO A SCENE WELLER HAD FULLY IMMERSED HIMSELF IN

Modernism was therefore perhaps a little too progressive for its own good. It would certainly have appeared less incongruous had it arrived a year later when, appearing on the very same *Top Of The Pops* episode, The Stone Roses and Happy Mondays proved the conventional band set-up could embrace the sounds of the Second Summer of Love. Or in 1991 when Primal Scream were transformed from rowdy garage rockers to ecstatic ravers by acid house maestro Andrew Weatherall.

Interestingly, the latter was instrumental in The Style Council's one true dance crossover, and one which originated not from *Modernism* but from 1985's commercial peak, *Our Favourite Shop.* After whipping the crowd up into a frenzy during Weatherall's debut at iconic all-nighter Shoom, *Shout To The Top!* was reworked by DJs Pete Heller and Terry Farley and diva Loleatta Holloway under the guise of Fire Island, subsequently becoming a long-time Ibiza staple.

Of course, following Britpop's implosion, and several further albums of traditional dad-rock, Weller started to dip his toes into dance music once again. Appearing on 2015's *Saturns Pattern*, *Phoenix* was a tribute to the late Chicago house maestro Frankie Knuckles. The same record also spawned a remix EP, *Saturns Peaks*, featuring contributions from Scottish experimentalists Young Fathers and two years later, Weller teamed up with another 80s survivor, Boy George, on *A Kind Revolution*'s dreamy house throwback *One Tear.*

Speaking about *Modernism* to *The Quietus* in 2014, Weller appeared to have made peace with its rejection: "Sometimes you're ahead of the game and sometimes people don't get it and that's just one of those things you have to accept and carry on." In fact, he even returned to Polydor for 2020's *On Sunset*, with the label – this time in an era where genre hopping is actively encouraged – allowing several excursions into electronica. It's a neat end to a story which, contrary to his guitar classicism status, proves that Weller is one of pop's most underrated risk takers. ■

TOP 20 SCOTTISH SINGLES OF THE 80s

THERE WAS PLENTY OF TALENT TO BE FOUND NORTH OF THE BORDER IN THE 80s, AS THIS RUNDOWN OF CLASSIC SCOTTISH SINGLES CONFIRMS

BARRY PAGE

In the 1970s, Scotland's economy and morale were hugely hit by deindustrialisation, resulting in the closure of several coal mines, factories and shipyards. But against a bleak fiscal backdrop of proliferating strike action and rising unemployment, the country's music industry thrived, with the internationally-successful Bay City Rollers the chief flyers of the Saltire.

Music certainly provided a welcome outlet for Scotland's disaffected youth and a number of talented artists emerged during the punk rock boom of 1976, all encouraged by the fleeting subculture's DIY ethos. And, as our countdown reveals, a plethora of acts left a lasting impression in the ensuing decade.

20

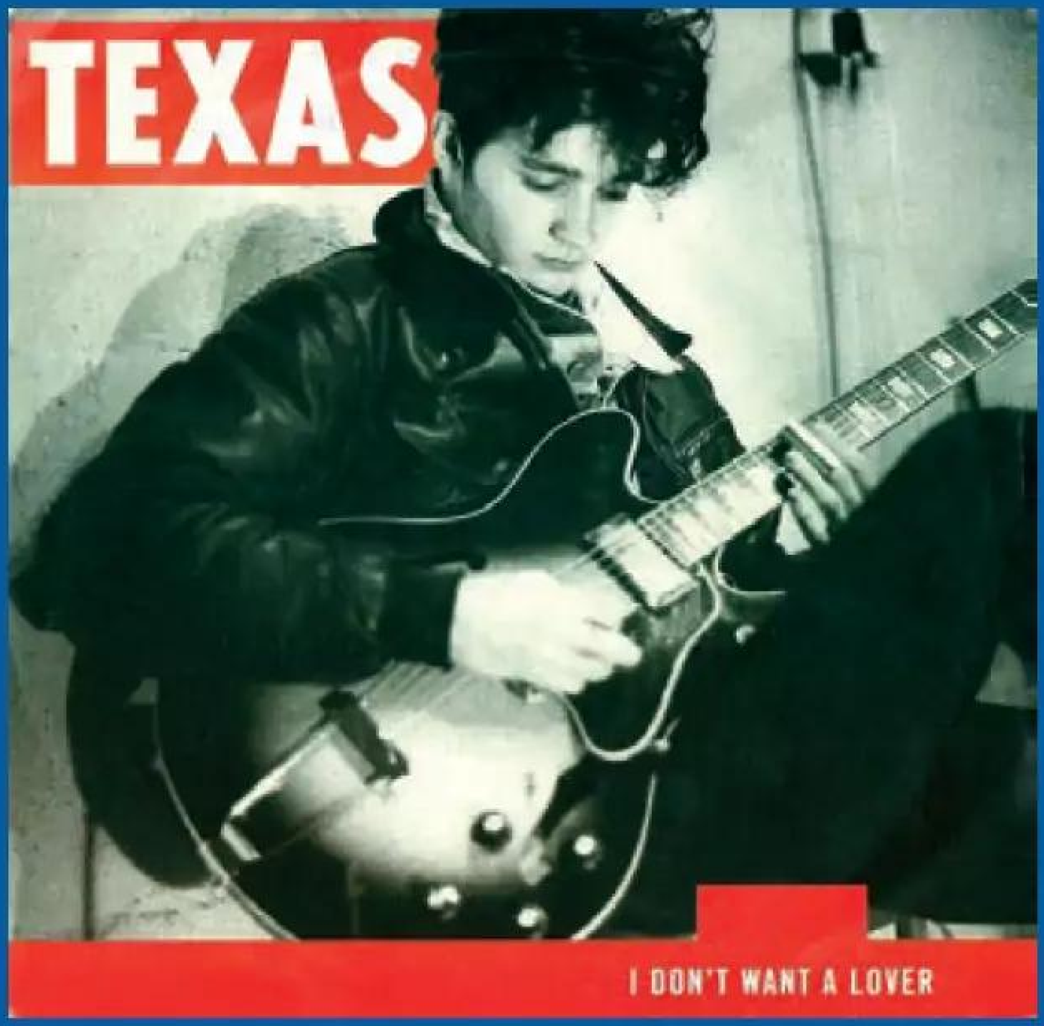
WET WET WET
SWEET LITTLE MYSTERY (1987)

Following their transition from punks to blue-eyed soul boys, Wet Wet Wet signed a major label deal in 1985, though retained some indie cred via their Scritti Politti-sourced moniker. Heavily influenced by Motown, Philly soul and Stax Records, the band headed to Memphis to record with Al Green collaborator and producer Willie Mitchell, and the sessions spawned an early version of this sprightly hit single. However, wearing their influences firmly on their sleeves came at a cost, as the Wets were legally obliged to give Van Morrison and John Martyn co-writing credits.

19

COCTEAU TWINS
PEARLY-DEWDROPS' DROPS (1984)

Named after one of Simple Minds' early songs, Cocteau Twins formed in 1979, and soon joined legendary post-punk label 4AD's roster. One of the earliest exponents of the dream pop subgenre, the key to their sound was guitarist Robin Guthrie, whose prioritisation of sonic texture over musical proficiency would earn him visionary status, as well as vocalist Elizabeth Fraser, whose otherworldly lyrics were often gleaned from foreign literature. Arguably their most accessible track, *Pearly-Dewdrops' Drops* rode an ethereal wave into the UK Top 30, and almost topped John Peel's Festive Fifty.



18

TEXAS
I DON'T WANT A LOVER (1989)

Based around the songwriting partnership of singer Sharleen Spiteri and former Altered Images and Hipsway bassist Johnny McElhone, Texas formed in 1986 and later scored a worldwide hit with this blues-tinged classic. Explaining its lyrical inspiration in 2013, Spiteri told *The Daily Telegraph*: "I was obsessed with not just wanting physical love, I wanted mental love, I wanted my best friend, I wanted everything and the whole package." The single's success was something of a false dawn for Texas, whose next significant hit was perennial radio favourite *Say What You Want* in 1997.

17

SHEENA EASTON
9 TO 5 (1980)

A future James Bond movie theme singer and Prince collaborator, this Lanarkian lass came to prominence on reality TV show *The Big Time*, which documented her EMI audition and earliest recording sessions. The exposure was priceless as both *9 To 5* and a re-release of flop debut single *Modern Girl* simultaneously flew up the charts. Penned by jobbing songwriter Florrie Palmer, *9 To 5* had been sourced by keen-eared producer Christopher Neil, and topped the charts in the US, where it was retitled *Morning Train* to differentiate it from Dolly Parton's identically-named No.1 single.

16

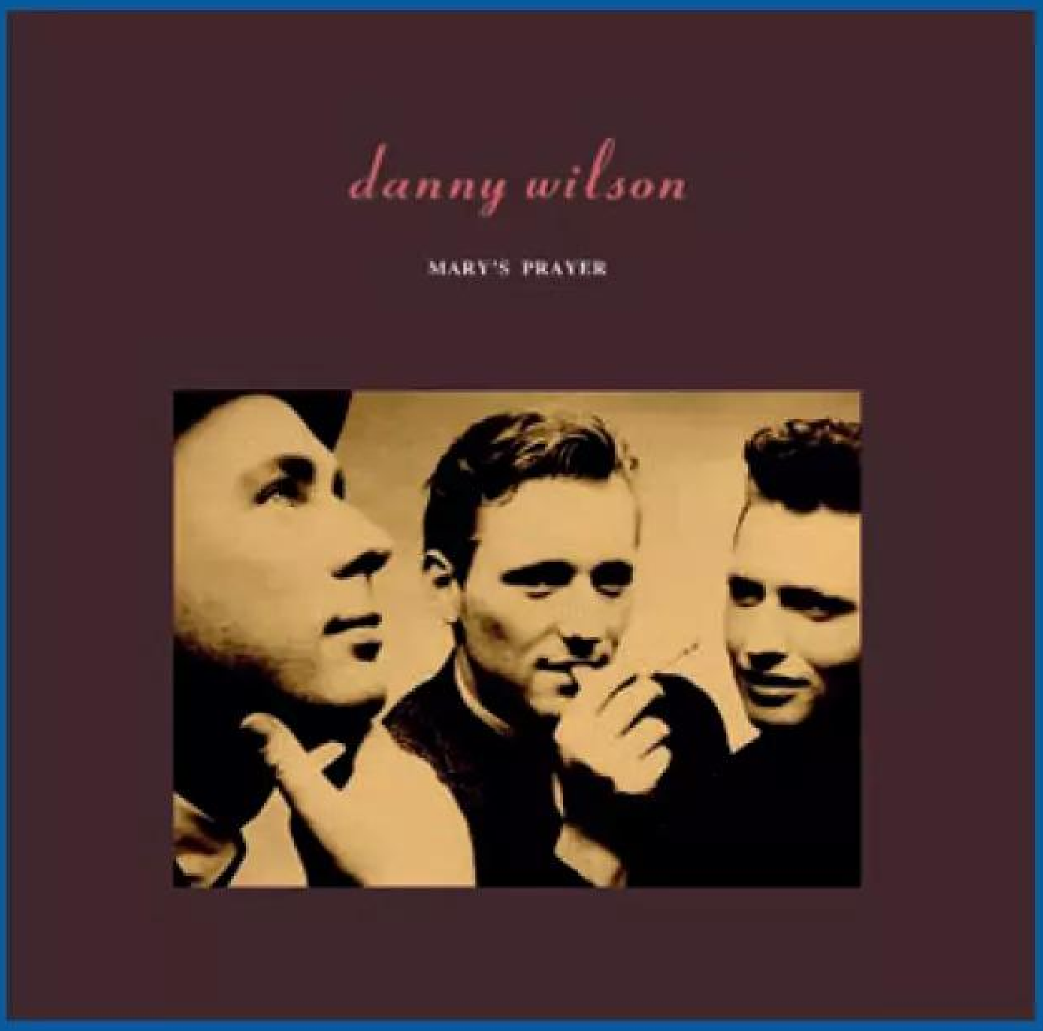
DEACON BLUE
DIGNITY (1987)

Reflecting on a streetside scene outside his Pollokshields flat, Ricky Ross penned Deacon Blue's signature song – which tells the uplifting story of a disgruntled road sweeper who dreams of buying a boat – whilst holidaying in Crete. "Everyone was going on about unemployment at the time," Ross explained to the *Daily Record* in 2012, "but there were also a lot of people unhappy with the work that they were in." A flop upon its original release, a new version overseen by producer extraordinaire Bob Clearmountain rewarded the social commentators with their first hit.

15

HUE AND CRY
LABOUR OF LOVE (1987)

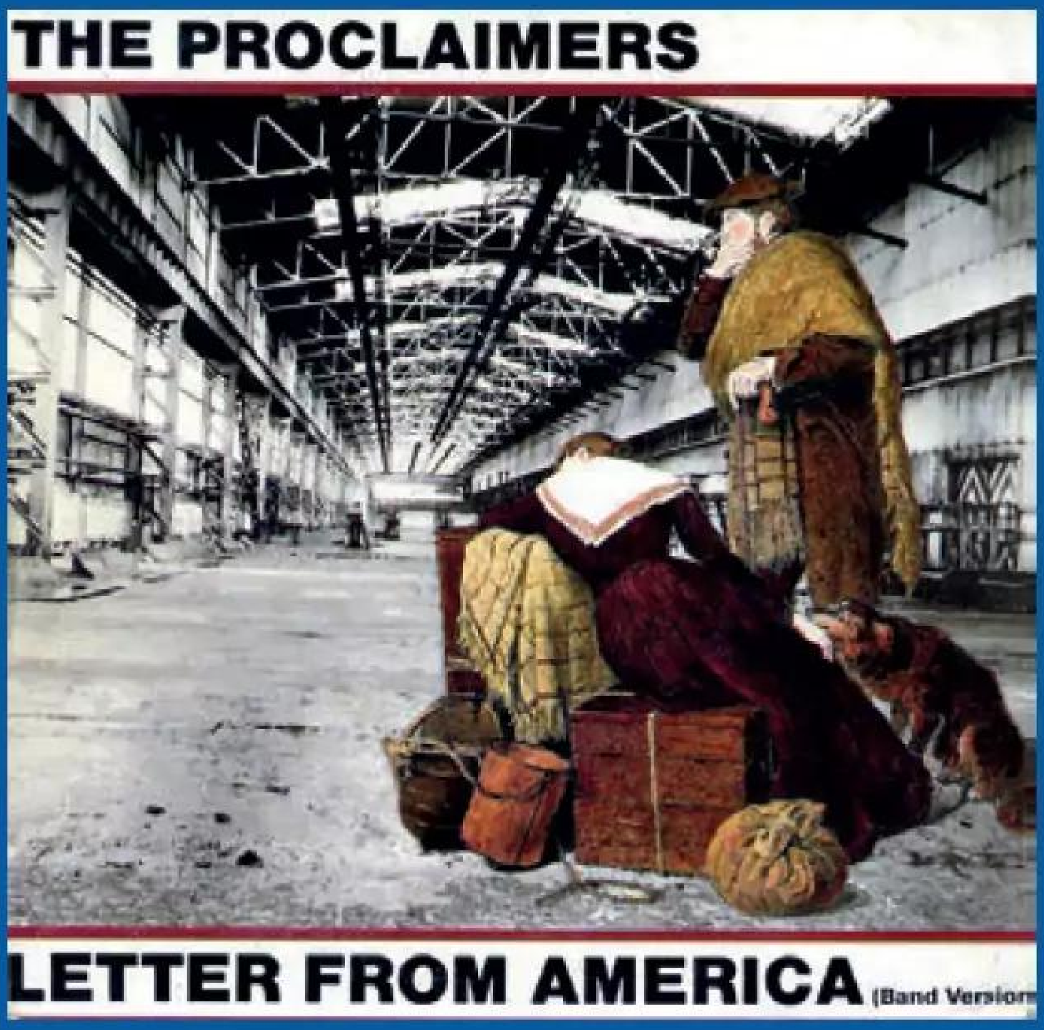
Comprising brothers Pat and Greg Kane, Hue And Cry achieved their biggest hit with this politically-charged classic, which started life as an experiment with a Roland CR-78 drum machine. Beginning its chart ascension in the wake of the 1987 General Election, the single's release was certainly timely. "The verses are all about realising you're voting for something that's actually not in your best interests, because you've been suckered into it," Pat told *Songwriting* magazine. "It's about the love affair that existed between parts of the British working class and Margaret Thatcher."



14

DANNY WILSON
MARY'S PRAYER (1987)

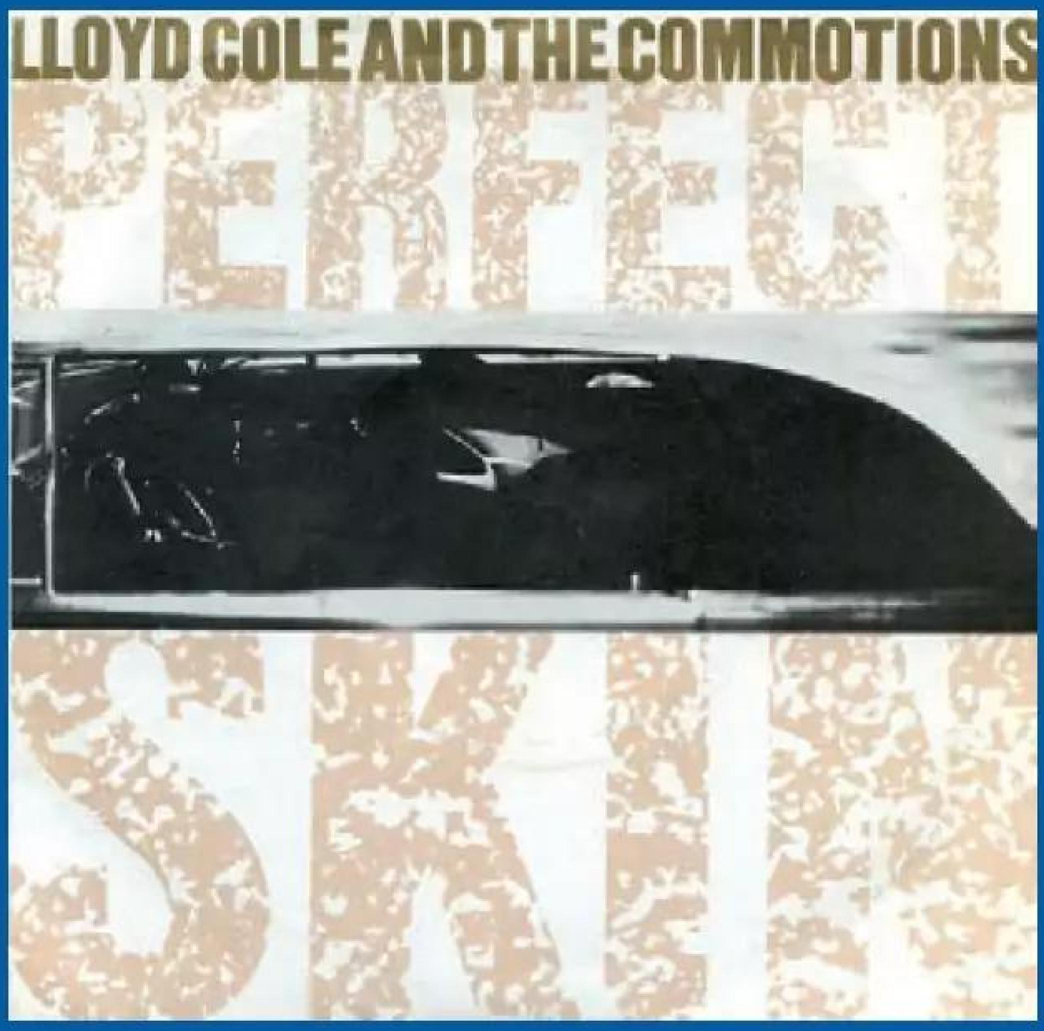
Having signed to Virgin Records in 1986, the career of Dundee-based trio Spencer Tracey got off to an inauspicious start after objections from the legendary actor's estate resulted in a last-minute name change to Danny Wilson, and their fortunes were compounded when debut single *Mary's Prayer* failed twice in 1987. But following a phone-in vote on Radio One segment 'Top Of The Flops', in which listeners were asked to nominate a single that deserved to be a success, a fresh release of this sophisti-pop classic soon hit the upper echelons of the charts.



13

THE PROCLAIMERS
LETTER FROM AMERICA (1987)

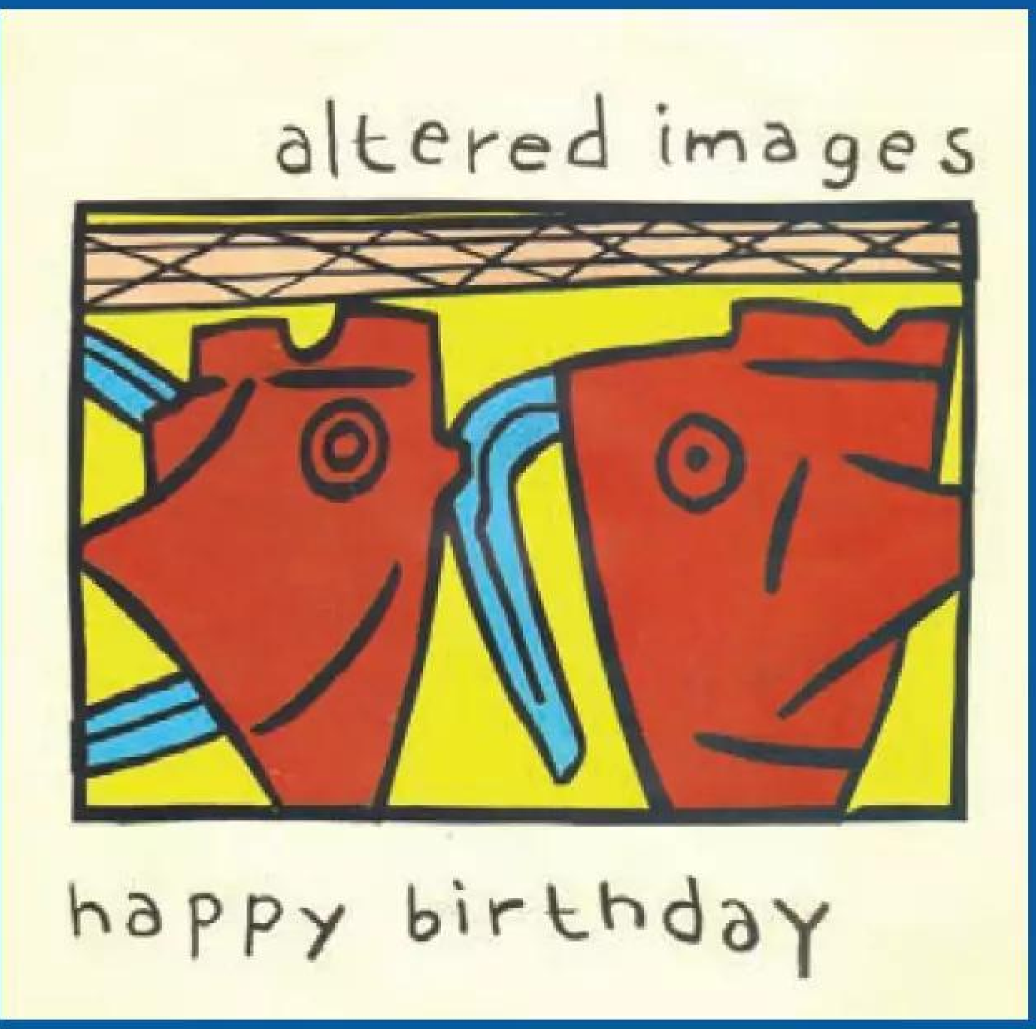
The Proclaimers received significant leg-ups from Kevin Rowland and The Housemartins, before an appearance on *The Tube* prompted label interest. Singing in their Scottish accents, bespectacled twins Craig and Charles Reid stood out from their compatriots, and *Letter From America* – whose themes of emigration and economic decline still resonate – gave them the breakthrough. "It was basically rage at what was going on," Craig told the BBC. "Both of us were disgusted by the callous way that unemployment was used to break organised labour, to break the spirit of people."



12

LLOYD COLE AND THE COMMOTIONS
PERFECT SKIN (1984)

With their mixture of jangly indie-pop and witty wordplay, Lloyd Cole And The Commotions certainly gave The Smiths a good run for their money in a year when guitars were seemingly out of fashion. Like much of classic parent album *Rattlesnakes*, debut single *Perfect Skin* drew upon romantic imagery found in films and books, but former literature student Cole later suggested to *The Guardian* there was an ulterior motive to his clever lyric writing: "I'd read about Bob Dylan seducing women by writing songs for them, so I was showing off with words."



11

ALTERED IMAGES

HAPPY BIRTHDAY (1981)

Already one of the stars of acclaimed movie *Gregory's Girl*, Clare Grogan managed to maintain a dual career as singer of the John Peel-approved Altered Images. After blagging their way onto Siouxsie And The Banshees' Kaleidoscope Tour, they also persuaded guitarist Steve Severin to produce debut album *Happy Birthday*, and the gothic band's distinctive sound rubbed off on them. In fact, it was Severin who suggested the very Banshees-esque marimba intro for the hit title track, which, to his annoyance, was re-recorded with Human League producer Martin Rushent.

10

FICTION FACTORY

(FEELS LIKE) HEAVEN (1983)

Formed in 1982, one-hit wonders Fiction Factory scored a European smash with this glacial pop classic, whose lyrics stemmed from an imaginary relationship break-up. "Its lyrics are like an anti-love song," singer Kevin Patterson explained to the *Daily Record*. "It's someone singing about another person who they really don't like. When you're in their company it's terrible and when they go it feels like heaven." The band's profile was further boosted by a tour support slot with OMD, whom they shared management with, but their career fizzled out within a few years.

09

STRAWBERRY SWITCHBLADE

SINCE YESTERDAY (1984)

Smash Hits cover stars before registering a single hit, Rose McDowall and Jill Bryson, with their pretty bows and polka-dot outfits, were two of the most striking stars of the 80s. As their moniker suggested, though, there was darkness lurking behind the colourful facade. Debut single *Trees And Flowers* documented Bryson's struggles with agoraphobia, while stunning follow-up *Since Yesterday* – which recycled melodic elements from an old song titled *Dance* – addressed the emotional impact of impending nuclear attack, in an era when Cold War tensions were still rife.

08

THE BLUEBELLS

YOUNG AT HEART (1984)

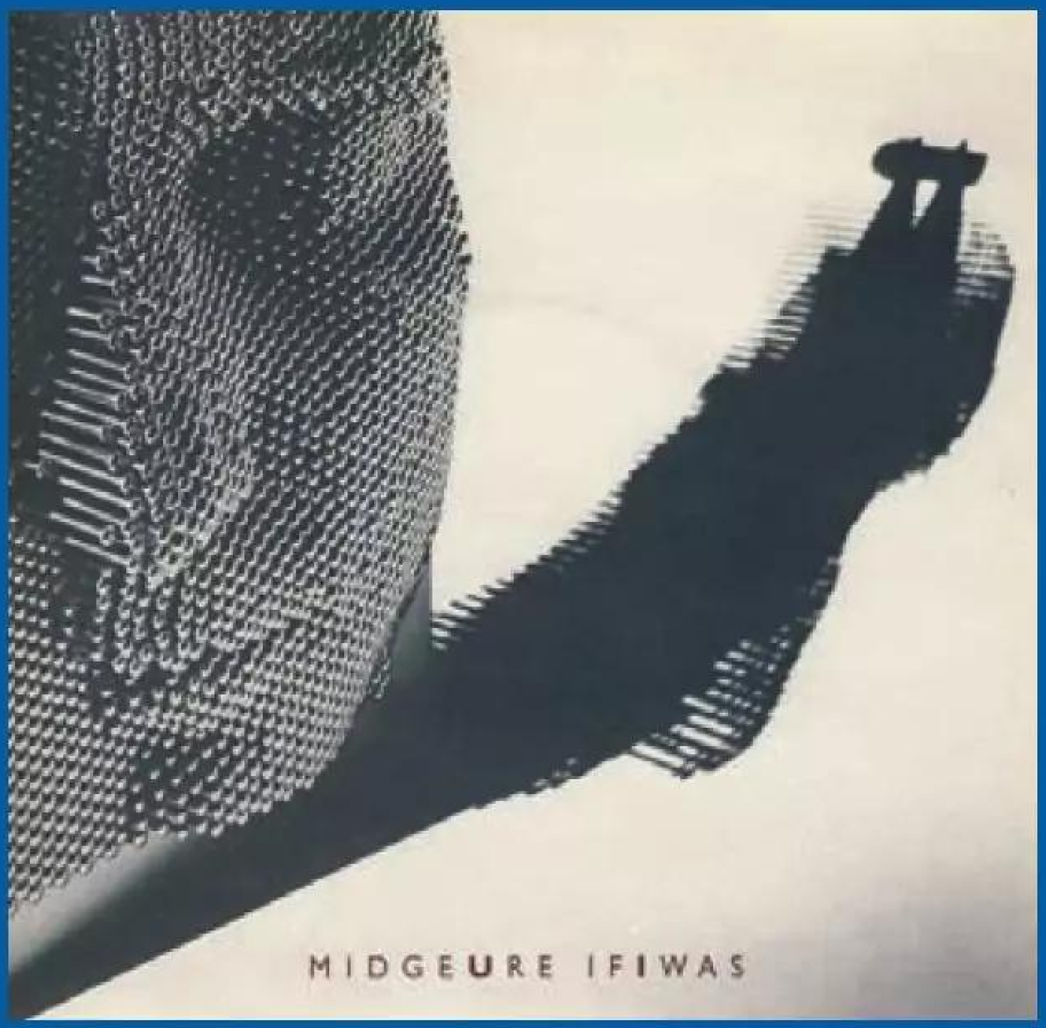
Appearing in a very different guise on Bananarama's debut album, *Deep Sea Skiving*, this classic was originally penned by the 'Nanas, along with Bluebells guitarist Robert Hodgens, who'd been dating Siobhan Fahey since 1981. It was then rearranged and re-recorded by The Bluebells, with session musician Bobby Valentino adding the distinctive violin flourishes that would later earn him a co-writing credit. A sizeable hit in 1984, interest in the song intensified nine years later following its use in a VW advert, giving the band – who've recently released a new LP – a surprise UK No.1.

07

BIG COUNTRY

FIELDS OF FIRE (1983)

Boasting an incredible twin-guitar sound that often evoked the indigenous tones of bagpipes, Big Country purposely avoided familiar rock'n'roll tropes, as frontman Stuart Adamson told *Smash Hits*: "Pop music hasn't used guitars in adventurous enough ways, so we've tried to make different sounds, rather than just strumming chords with a screaming lead break in the middle." Record buyers who helped send anthemic single *Fields Of Fire* into the UK Top 10 received a further treat on rousing B-side *Angle Park*, whose Hooky-esque bassline made the band sound like a Highland Joy Division.



06

MIDGE URE

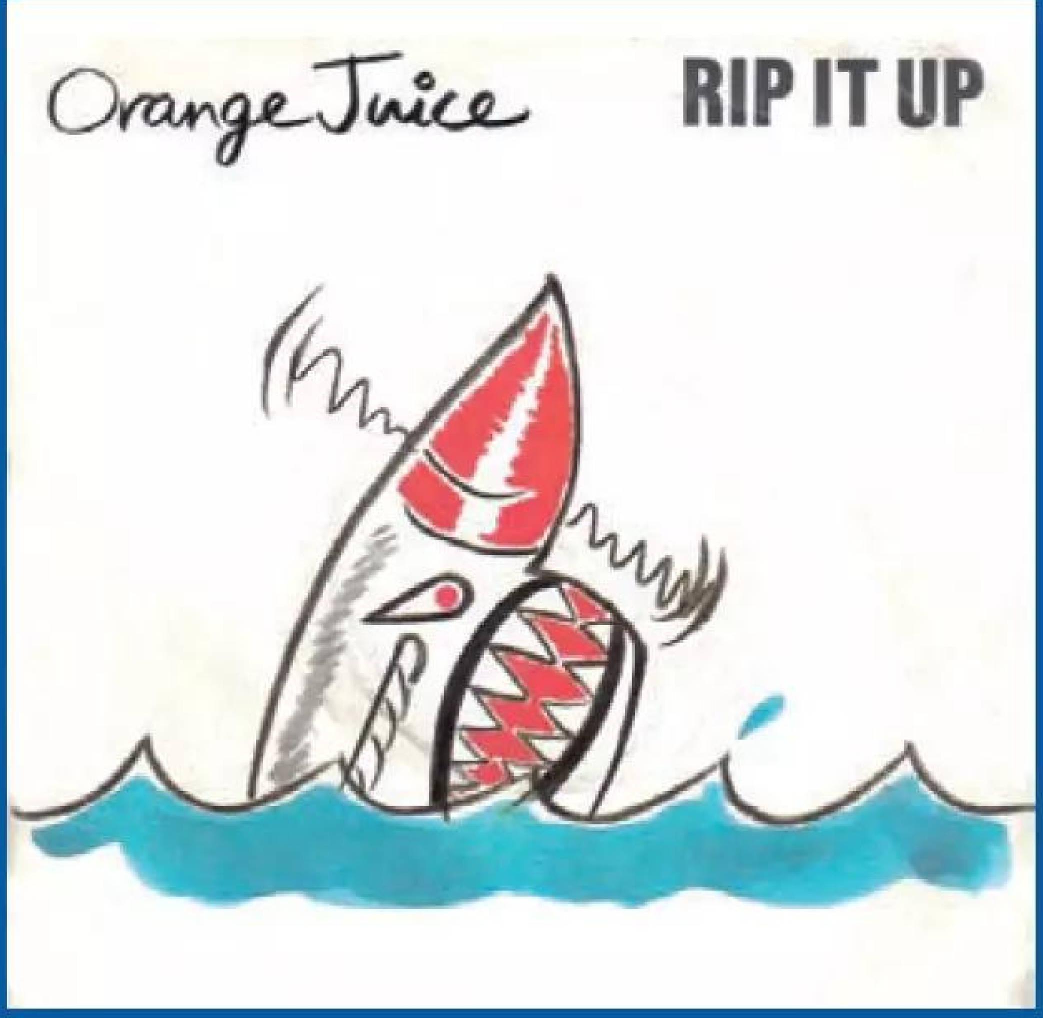
IF I WAS (1985)

Following his humanitarian work with Band Aid and Live Aid, Midge Ure's stock was never as high as it was in 1985, and with Ultravox officially on hiatus, it was the perfect time to release a solo album. Lead single from *The Gift*, the chart-topping *If I Was*, evolved from a demo by keyboardist Danny Mitchell, whose band Messengers had supported Ultravox on their Set Movements tour in 1984. "I grabbed it with both hands," remembered Midge, "messed around with it, sprinkled it with fairy dust and the rest is history." The track also features Level 42's Mark King on bass.

05

THE BLUE NILE
TINSELTOWN IN THE RAIN (1984)

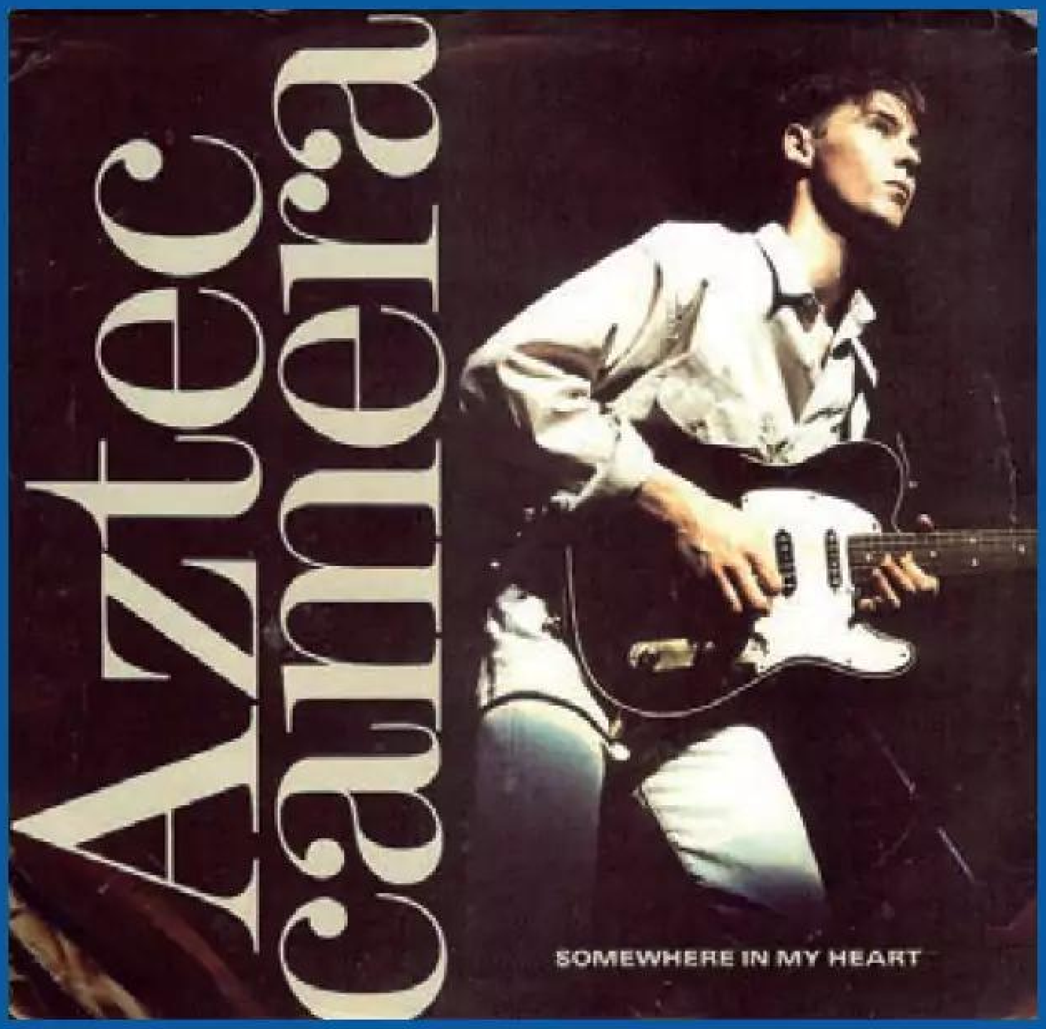
Adopting almost punk-like methodology, The Blue Nile used synthesizers and drum machines to mask their naivety. But what they lacked in musicianship they made up for in imagination, resulting in timeless soundscapes that transcended chart trends. Highly evocative of the city in which it was written, this classic 45 painted a romanticised picture of Glasgow, its bustling streets and towering buildings brought to life by Paul Buchanan's impassioned vocals. "My main goal is to try and express ineffable beauty and retain some credibility," he told *The Independent*. Mission accomplished.



04

ORANGE JUICE
RIP IT UP (1983)

Originally part of legendary indie label Postcard's roster (which included Aztec Camera, Josef K and honorary Glaswegians The Go-Betweens), Orange Juice racked up a number of flop singles before hitting the Top 10 with this dancefloor-friendly classic. Something of a sonic departure for the band, its meld of funky Chic-esque guitars and almost comical synth bass – courtesy of a Roland TB-303, whose squelchy sounds would later become synonymous with the acid house movement of the late 80s – proved to be the perfect backdrop for Edwyn Collins' vocals.



03

AZTEC CAMERA
SOMEWHERE IN MY HEART (1988)

Aztec Camera never really had a settled line-up, and by the time of third album *Love*, the band was now effectively a solo vehicle for precocious boy wonder Roddy Frame. Eschewing his indie roots for a more soulful and sophisticated sound, numerous producers and hired hands were brought in to help craft what he saw as his *Young Americans*, but the album's standout track owed more to Springsteen than Bowie, and bizarrely almost didn't make the final cut. "It was my biggest hit but it was the runt of the litter," Frame told *The Quietus*.

02

THE ASSOCIATES
PARTY FEARS TWO (1982)

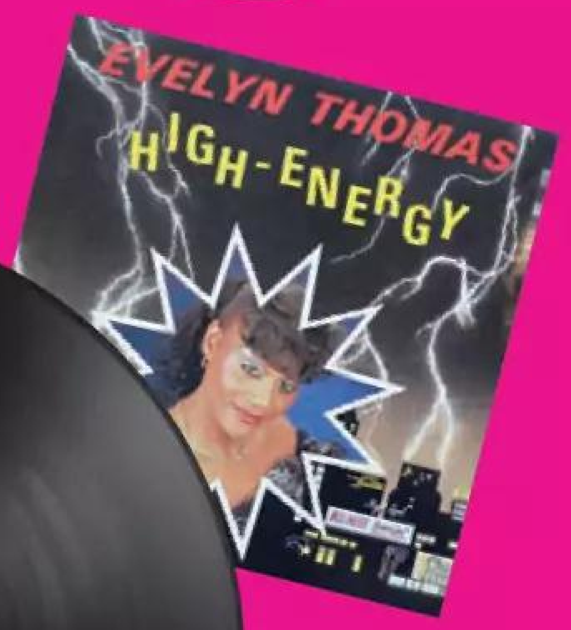
Deemed too melodic for a punk audience, Billy Mackenzie and Alan Rankine waited several years before unleashing their baroque pop masterpiece, whose otherworldly operatics found favour with the New Romantics. Inspiration came from one of Mackenzie's siblings, who'd spotted two girls aggressively attempting to enter a nightclub, but the lyrics, which alluded to schizophrenia, were deliberately oblique. Rankine felt it was emblematic of the duo's outsiderdom. "It's about feeling alienated," he told *Uncut*, "like you don't belong and feeling also that other people seem to be doing it with ease."

01

SIMPLE MINDS
DON'T YOU (FORGET ABOUT ME) (1985)

By 1985, Glasgow's finest had come a long way since their transition from punk-rockers Johnny And The Self Abusers to arty New Wavers Simple Minds. With six studio LPs and several hit singles under their belt, the band's career was on the upward trajectory. However, Stateside success still eluded them. That was until their label presented them with a demo of *Don't You (Forget About Me)*, which had been written to order for the soundtrack of coming-of-age John Hughes movie, *The Breakfast Club*. Its writers felt it was perfect for Simple Minds, but for a band used to penning their own material, they needed a while to be convinced of its artistic merits. It was shopped around – even turned down by big names like Bryan Ferry – but the band eventually caved in. It helped that co-writer Keith Forsey was an affiliate of legendary Italian producer Giorgio Moroder, who'd been highly influential in shaping Simple Minds' early sound. More crucially, though, they were able to put their own spin on it. Charlie Burchill ramped up the power chords, while Jim Kerr added the air-punching vocal histrionics that bookend the track. Little did they know a song knocked off in just a few hours would become a transatlantic smash, propelling them to stadium-filling glory.

"WITH SIX LPs AND SEVERAL HIT SINGLES UNDER THEIR BELT, THE BAND'S CAREER WAS ON AN UPWARD TRAJECTORY, BUT STATESIDE SUCCESS STILL ELUDED THEM"



HI-NRG

THE TURBO-CHARGED DANCE MUSIC THAT TOUGHENED UP DISCO

STEVE O'BRIEN

WHAT IS IT?

Whether or not the shameful Disco Demolition Night (where a giant crate of disco records was blown up at Chicago's Comiskey Park) on 12 July 1979 had anything to do with the death of disco in the final months of the 70s is debatable, but certainly it was already in the rear-view mirror culturally by the early 80s. In its place was Hi-NRG, a sort of turbo-charged disco that powered its way through the gay American nightclub scene like a Hennessey Venom F5.

Hi-NRG tracks are generally typified by staccato hi-hat rhythms, reverberated vocals, simple octave basslines and a tempo between 120bpm and 140bpm. Altogether, they have a tougher, faster, increasingly rock-like sound than the more commercially-driven disco. Unlike most musical genres, its origins can be traced to a single song – Donna Summer's Giorgio Moroder/Pete Bellotte-produced *I Feel Love* from 1977. That track's insistent four-on-the-floor bass drum and off-beat hi-hat would provide the template for the Hi-NRG revolution, even giving the genre its name, when Summer described the song as having a "high energy vibe".

Though Hi-NRG was born in the gay American club scene, it very quickly migrated out with Stock Aitken Waterman giving it a commercial polish for the UK market with tracks such as Dead Or Alive's *You Spin Me Round (Like A Record)*. In the mid-80s the genre was so popular that magazines such as *Record Mirror* (over here) and *Dance Music Report* (in the States) were even publishing weekly Hi-NRG charts.

However, Hi-NRG's time in the sun would be short. By the late 80s, it would give way to techno and house, just as disco had feathered the nest for Hi-NRG 10 years before. Its legacy would live on in EDM and trance, and the name is still used occasionally to describe the odd club-targeted remix.

It's so good: Queen Of Disco Donna Summer not only helped kickstart the Hi-NRG scene, but she also gave it its name

WHAT THEY SAY

"At its zenith, Hi-NRG was the whole package; a heady mixture of electronic music and pulsating beats, supported by lyrics commonly exuding a sense of camp, and/or overt homosexual suggestibility, delivered with a visual aesthetic that frequently reflected both."

DAVID CARROLL, *RE-APPRAISING HI-NRG, THE QUEER SOUNDTRACK TO THE 1980s*

Sylvester hit big with Pride anthem *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* and featured on Patrick Cowley's Hi-NRG classic, *Menergy*

"The nonfunkiness was crucial. Slamming rather than swinging, Hi-NRG's white European feel was accentuated by butt-bumping bass twangs at the end of each bar."

SIMON REYNOLDS, *RIP IT UP AND START AGAIN: POSTPUNK 1978-1984*

"The whole purpose of Hi-NRG is not only to feel good and positive, because that's the kind of music it is, but also it celebrates life, it celebrates existing, it celebrates the wonder of getting up in the morning and having a cup of coffee! That's how tremendous it is. Hi-NRG not only celebrates that, but it embellishes that."

BOBBY ORLANDO, ITALODISCO.CO.UK

ESSENTIAL SINGLES

DONNA SUMMER I FEEL LOVE (1977)

The Queen Of Disco's 1977 album *I Remember Yesterday* was conceived with the idea of having each track evoke a different musical decade, with *I Feel Love* representing the future. It's true that nothing else in 1977 sounded like it, and its unique, pioneering sound propelled it to No.1 in the UK and No.6 on the Billboard chart in the United States. It would prove one of the most influential songs in music history, with Brian Eno famously telling Bowie that he'd heard "the sound of the future". And 46 years on from its release, it *still* sounds like it's time travelled from the 22nd century.

SYLVESTER YOU MAKE ME FEEL (MIGHTY REAL) (1978)

A club hit before it was officially released as a single – DJs had started spinning this when it was the B-side to *Dance (Disco Heat)* from Sylvester's album *Step II* – *You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)* would be the only UK Top 10 hit for the flamboyant Los Angeles-born singer. Amazingly, the song was originally waxed as a piano-driven gospel number, only to be revved up by a clearly *I Feel Love*-influenced Patrick Cowley to become the Hi-NRG classic we know today. In 2022, *Time Out* magazine ranked it No.8 in their list of The 50 Best Gay Songs To Celebrate Pride All Year Long.

SPARKS THE NUMBER ONE SONG IN HEAVEN (1979)

Giorgio Moroder brought his Hi-NRG mojo to Ron and Russell Mael's eighth album, *No.1 In Heaven* and sent its second single, *The Number One Song In Heaven*, not quite to the top of the charts, but a rather respectable No.14 in the UK. A massive sonic departure for the group, it's a track that provided the template for Pet Shop Boys and a dozen other electropop bands of the 80s.

ESSENTIAL NAMES

PATRICK COWLEY

A close collaborator of Sylvester (Cowley played synths on Sylvester's 1978 album *Step II* in addition to writing the title track and *I Need Somebody To Love Tonight* for the singer's 1979 follow-up *Stars*). He was also a member of Sylvester's live band and joined him on several world tours. As a solo artist, Cowley's hits included the gay club anthems *Menergy* and *Megatron Man* (both 1981) and he shared vocals with Sylvester on the No.32-charting UK hit *Do Ya Wanna Funk*. It was during one world tour with Sylvester in late 1981, that Cowley complained of feeling unwell, and, after returning to the US, he was diagnosed with HIV, dying on 12 November 1982, aged 32.

Patrick Cowley and Sylvester

IAN LEVINE

In the 70s, Levine had made his name as a Northern Soul DJ, but as the resident disc-spinner at London's celebrated Heaven nightclub in the 80s he would help popularise Hi-NRG across the UK. As a producer, he was also responsible for many homegrown Hi-NRG numbers, through his work at Record Shack Records. Notable releases from this time on the label include Miquel Brown's *So Many Men, So Little Time* and Evelyn Thomas' *High Energy*. Levine also briefly took Take That in a Hi-NRG direction for three tracks on their debut studio album, 1992's *Take That & Party*, and worked his remix magic on artists such as Hazell Dean, Bronski Beat and Pet Shop Boys.

BOBBY O

Oft mentioned as one of the founding fathers of Hi-NRG, it was Bobby Orlando (known as Bobby O) that Neil Tennant sought out when, in 1983, he was sent, as assistant editor at *Smash Hits*, to New York, ostensibly to interview The Police. A massive fan of Bobby's work, Tennant convinced the producer to work on their first single, the original version of *West End Girls*. Orlando would become one of the most sought-after producers of the decade, via a multitude of disco and Hi-NRG releases on his label, O Records. A student of Giorgio Moroder, Orlando's galloping basslines would grace the work of artists such as Divine with *Native Love (Step By Step)* as well as his own (*She Has A Way*).

© Getty

NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL
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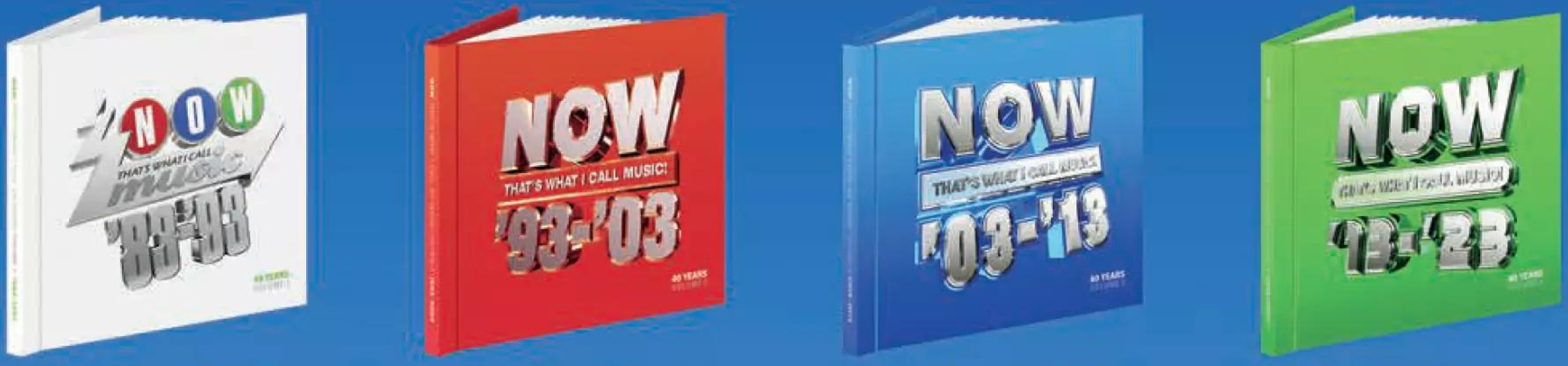

1983-1993 60 TRACKS

1993-2003 60 TRACKS

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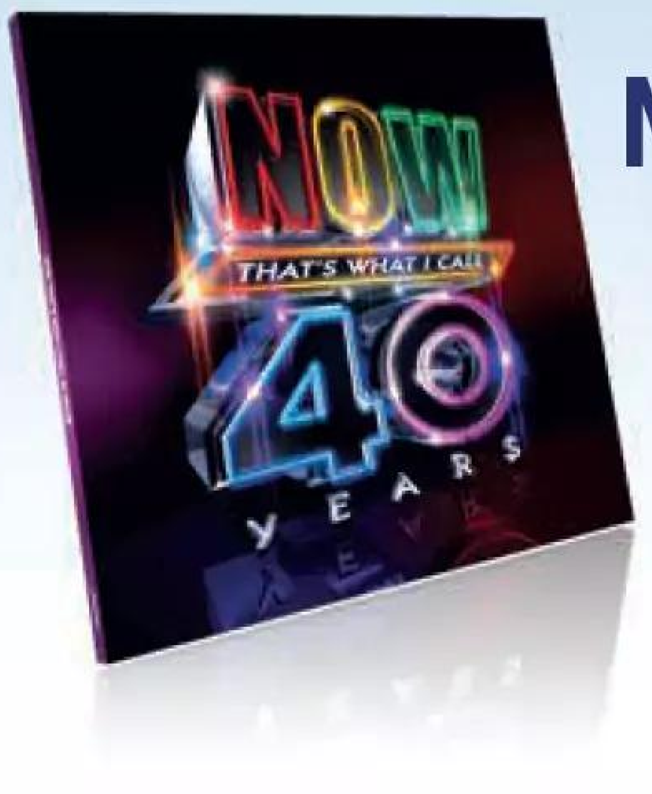

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RATINGS

EXCELLENT ★★★★★
VERY GOOD ★★★★
GOOD ★★★
PATCHY ★★
POOR ★

Prince & The New Power Generation's stunning boxset of *Diamonds And Pearls* leads the way in our reissues section – we review it on page 82

HOT LIST

NEW RELEASES THAT NEED TO BE ON YOUR CULTURAL RADAR

STEVE HARNELL

© Patrik Anderson

1 UP
R.E.M.
Newly remastered and expanded to mark its 25th birthday, a deluxe 2CD/Blu-ray version of R.E.M's 11th studio album now comes with an 11-song *Party Of Five* live show. Also available on green marbled vinyl is a 14-track 180g 2LP incarnation from the band's official webstore. An accompanying 32-page hardcover book boasts new interviews with band members.

2 THE MASTERPLAN
OASIS
Another 25th anniversary reissue, Oasis' stellar B-sides compilation is back in a variety of formats – CD, cream cassette and limited edition double vinyl. Includes the imperious likes of *Acquiesce, Talk Tonight, Half The World Away* and the gorgeous strings-laden title track.

3 LAUGH TRACK
THE NATIONAL
First Two Pages Of Frankenstein may have only seen the light of day at the end of April, but the kings of Sad Dad music are already back with a surprise companion album culled from the same recording sessions. New 12-song LP *Laugh Track* includes the Bon Iver-assisted single *Weird Goodbyes* and bristling seven-minute closer *Smoke Detector.*

4 STILL KICKING
TRICKSTER
Inspired by crawling out of the wreckage of a near-fatal car crash in the South of France, here's the first taste of a full studio album due next year from Trickster, co-produced by former Robbie Williams collaborator Guy Chambers. It's already received widespread radio airplay across Europe and South America, with further dance mixes on the horizon, too.

5 23 SECONDS TO ETERNITY
KLF COMMUNICATIONS
Released on limited-edition BFI Blu-ray and DVD (Dual Format Edition) on 6 November, *23 Seconds To Eternity* collects music videos and shorts produced and directed by Bill Butt in collaboration with Jimmy Cauty and Bill Drummond across their various guises as The JAMs, The KLF and The Timelords. This first ever compilation of KLF Communications' films includes previously unreleased material alongside an illustrated booklet.

© Jonas Akerlund

DURAN DURAN
DANSE MACABRE

TAPE MODERN/BMG

★★★★

RECORDING THEIR QUICKEST ALBUM SINCE THEIR DEBUT SEES DURAN DURAN TOO BUSY HAVING FUN TO CARE WHAT ANYONE ELSE THINKS THEY SHOULD BE DOING

Duran Duran could have got away with making much less noise around their Halloween album. Indeed, they could feasibly have not pointed out the spooky thematic link around these 13 songs at all: *Ghost Town*, *Psycho Killer* and *Supernature* don't really have anything in common.

Yet it's also true that *Danse Macabre* is really three ideas in one: covers, old songs revisited and three new tunes. What links them isn't so much Nick Rhodes' love of vampires and demons – it's Duran Duran having a right laugh, making a new record in under a week just because they can. Even when it's rough around the edges, you can tell everyone is in great spirits.

The biggest spectre in Duran's ghostly realm should be that of the commercial doom of previous covers record, *Thank You*. But that's come to be reassessed as an interesting experiment, which is the mood on the six covers here: sure, *Psycho Killer* and *Ghost Town* are knockabout karaoke, while *Paint It Black* is comfortably the low point, overwrought nonsense that should have been kept for a deluxe edition at best.

But *Supernature* and *Spellbound* are inspired takes whose speed of recording allow an edge to appear in their taut playing. Best of all, *Bury A Friend* kidnaps Billie Eilish's DIY original and brings the gothic glamour of Duran's finest ballads, turning it into a none-more-80s grandiose drama.

Of the reworkings, *Secret Oktober 31st* is how the original should have sounded if the three Taylors had had time to visit the studio, while *Nightboat* has a more organic noir production. The big surprise is *Love Voudou*: few would have chosen Duran to revisit it, but John and Roger's rhythm section add the supple groove the original needed, while backing singers Anna Ross and Rachael O'Connor exemplify their powerful presence, maintained throughout the album.

The new title track is a rare and delicious example of Simon Le Bon just being silly, vamping it up at a ghoulish party over an industrial John/Roger groove helped by Warren Cuccurullo adding equally bizarre riffs. *Black Moonlight* is equally fun, joining *Pressure Off* and *Anniversary* as 21st century classic party starters.

The real mystery arrives with *Confession In The Afterlife*, a textbook album-closer epic that Le Bon has correctly identified as more Arcadia than Duran. Is it art-rock, a Roxy Music tribute, an insight into the singer's darkness? Ultimately, who cares – whatever is going on here, it's beautiful.

That *Danse Macabre* has arrived so soon after *Future Past* might be a one-off. If so, it doesn't matter. Whatever brought about such a productive week, the listener gets to have as much devilment as the band. One of the finest examples of an album with the pressure off resulting in mighty mischief all round. **John Earls**

MADNESS
THEATRE OF THE ABSURD PRESENTS C'EST LA VIE

BMG

★★★★

Life seems to have been troubled for Madness in the seven years since previous album *Can't Touch Us Now*, with even their new press biography admitting recent times "saw the band at their most polarised and fragmented."

It appears Madness needed to get back to basics to reignite their songwriting spark, recording together as a six-piece, rather than going in separately in their siloed writing partnerships.

Doing so – on an industrial estate in Cricklewood – proved so fruitful that they've dispensed with outside producers for the first time since 1988's *The Madness*. Where that album largely sounded like knock-off Langer & Winstanley, Madness' 13th LP has plenty of fresh ideas while remembering to bring the big choruses along. It's probably their most-up for it all-out pop album since reforming for *Wonderful* 24 years ago.

Linked by six brief monologues narrated by uberfan Martin Freeman, it rumbles rather than explodes into life, the Prologue's songs – including established live favourites *Theatre Of The Absurd* and *Baby Burglar* – imbued with the melancholy of *Mad Not Mad*.

Five songs in, *What On Earth Is It (You Take Me For?)* kickstarts a fine run of ebullient bouncers, resembling *Wings Of A Dove* even as Woody's *Round We Go* hints at the band's troubles under the fairground mood.

Chris Foreman's defiant twangy guitar introducing *Lockdown And Frack Off* begins an even more hectic section, as Madness suddenly turn into a surf-rock band for three minutes before *Beginners 101*'s piano goes full *It Must Be Love* bittersweet wonder. There's still room for Foreman offering up a *Night Boat To Cairo*-style near instrumental pile-on before Suggs' *In My Street* ends the album with a call for togetherness that's anything but sentimental. You try getting in Suggs' way when his chorus is this steely.

Working together again for the first time in years has ironically made for one of Madness' most varied albums. Whatever caused their polarisation, they sound reinvigorated and up for mischief again. Rotten album title, mind. **JE**

VINCE CLARKE
SONGS OF SILENCE

MUTE

★★★★

© Eugene Richards

"I was in a state of shock, actually, when Mute said they wanted to release this album," admits Vince Clarke about his solo debut proper arriving a remarkable 43 years into his collaborative career. Thankfully, *Songs Of Silence* – a collection of instrumentals, each based around a single note – isn't the unlistenable vanity project that his own less-than-glowing endorsement would suggest.

Clarke is no stranger to the wordless, of course. A famously silent partner throughout his years with Yazoo and Erasure, the 63-year-old has also let the synths do all the talking on albums with Heaven 17's Martyn Ware and former Depeche Mode bandmate Martin Gore, not to mention sneaking out an album of library music under the name Deeptronica. But, recorded entirely on his beloved Eurorack at his New York home studio, this 10-track affair is Clarke's finest extra-curricular meeting of man and machine.

While the self-imposed brief seems restrictive, Clarke still manages to imbue each drone-heavy track with several creative flourishes: the hypnotic tribal percussion that suddenly propels *White Rabbit* into life, for example, or the haunting bowing cello on *The Lamentations Of Jeremiah*. Snatches of ghostly wailings from opera singer Caroline Joy on *Passage* and a burst of a mid-19th century anti-scab anthem on *Blackleg* also add depth to the prevailing bleak mood.

Indeed, no doubt inspired by the pandemic surroundings of its inception, *Songs Of Silence* has a definite and deliberate air of disillusionment, despair and decay. None more so than on the eerie soundscapes of *Red Planet* and closing track *Last Transmission*, both of which conjure up images of doomed space shuttles, and *Imminent*, another aptly titled blend of ominous Moog whirring and frazzled programmed guitars. That may well explain Clarke's bewilderment at his label's willingness to unleash it on the unsuspecting public. Yet there are still moments of beauty to be found in among all the shades of grey. **Jon O'Brien**

OMD
BAUHAUS STAIRCASE

100%

★★★★½

OMD KEEP UP THEIR SUBLIME RUN OF REUNION STUDIO ALBUMS BY ALTERNATELY GETTING POLITICAL AND FEELING LOVED UP ON YET ANOTHER STELLAR LATTER-PERIOD GEM

Just when they thought they could enjoy a cosy semi-retirement of performing old songs on tour, safe in the knowledge that their final LP, *The Punishment Of Luxury*, was a hell of a last studio statement, lockdown significantly changed Andy McCluskey and Paul Humphreys' lives.

For Humphreys, new fatherhood meant he had even less impetus to drag himself back to the studio. For McCluskey, however, total boredom meant he was becoming restless again. Like a frustrated teenager, he began stomping to his room to write songs, in order to have something to do.

Sure enough, there's a definite air of bored teen to OMD's first album in six years. It's a record they clearly *had* to make, because they'd have driven themselves mad otherwise. McCluskey's nihilism is most obvious on *Kleptocracy* and *Slow Train*, the two songs Humphreys didn't have time to mix, leaving rock producer David Watts to finish. Cleaving to McCluskey's most route-one teenage love of glam, they're big dumb synth-pop songs about, respectively, socialism and nothing at all, except for the need to sing "Na-na-na" for three minutes.

If they're deliciously unsubtle, don't assume this is a McCluskey solo album in all but name. When he does contribute, Humphreys is reliably fantastic. *Veruschka* is the kind of elegant mystery OMD have traded in for 45 years. You can unpick its film noir references easily enough, but it doesn't explain how Humphreys' melody is so perfectly balanced between terror and glacial beauty, even though it's a dividing line familiar from so many past OMD songs.

Look At You Now and *Where We Started* are similarly beautiful ballads all the more affecting because of McCluskey's initially offhand, conversational delivery. Written during a since-vanished romance, *Aphrodite's Favourite Child* ratchets up the tension, its simple structure only serving to highlight how intense McCluskey's declarations of love are.

It's impressive the ballads are still at home on an album that's the duo's most explicitly political. *Anthropocene* and *Evolution Of Species* are companion pieces about evolution that cleverly use Google's Text-To-Speak function, very much in the spirit of early electronics. The title track is another simple pop song, yet its warnings about "fascist art" are a clear message about the necessity of culture during tough times. And, if you want straight-up pop, *G.E.M.* is a stunning diss track that could be by Suzi Quatro.

So OMD have justified 2024's huge arena tour. Pretty much any song here will fit right in next to *Maid Of Orleans* and *Locomotion*. If *Bauhaus Staircase* is OMD's final album, it's a hell of a last studio statement. **JE**

THE ROLLING STONES
HACKNEY DIAMONDS

POLYDOR

★★★★

Much has been made that *Hackney Diamonds* is the Stones' first album of new music since *A Bigger Bang* 18 years ago. The bigger question is: When was the last good Stones album? *Steel Wheels* in 1989?

Thankfully, this really is the Stones' best album since *Steel Wheels*: probably since 1978's *Some Girls*. Mick Jagger has convincingly claimed that he only wanted to make a new LP if it was good enough. Thankfully,

Hackney Diamonds is way more than the "Will this do?" shrug that's hung over so many later Stones albums.

Only the mid-paced AOR of *Driving Me Too Hard* sounds like it was phoned in, and even that's perfectly pleasant, with some nice sighed backing vocals. Mostly, this is Jagger and Keith Richards finally remembering that they are *The Rolling Fucking Stones* and you'd better show them some respect. *Angry* is matched by *Whole Wide World* and the vintage blues of *Live By The Sword* – the latter reuniting Charlie Watts and Bill Wyman – for Jagger somehow sounding convincingly snotty despite age and wealth. Better still, *Bite My Head Off* is properly gonzo punk, with a frazzled bass solo by Paul McCartney.

If that's the Stones deciding they've nothing left to lose so why not have fun, *Sweet Sounds Of*

© Mark Seliger

Heaven is the all-time classic, Lady Gaga's vocal a duet for the ages precisely because she doesn't showboat her power. That "Play me something, Stevie" instruction from Jagger before Stevie Wonder's spring-heeled keyboard solo is also delicious, but really, it's those horns. My God, those horns. There's plenty more similar *Wild Horses*-evoking drama elsewhere here, too, as *Depending On You* can attest.

If you're wondering where such majesty came from, credit producer Andrew Watt for telling Jagger and Richards to iron out their problems with each other, not him. Credit Mick'n'Keef for listening. As the sweet cover of Muddy Waters' *Rolling Stone Blues* confirms, after 60 years the mischief is still right there. Whatever happens next, here's the late-era triumph that we've all waited so long for. **JE**

LOL TOLHURST X BUDGIE X JACKNIFE LEE
LOS ANGELES

PIAS

★★★½

The ex-drummers of The Cure and Siouxsie And The Banshees, Lol Tolhurst and Budgie's roles as sometime keyboard players with their former bands proves essential in bringing their joint debut album to life.

More of a dance record than any kind of extended drum solo haven, *Los Angeles*' percussion naturally has some of the eccentricities of their old day jobs: *Uh-Oh* is firmly from *The Love Cats*' beatnik world, while

Everything And Nothing has the malevolent glint of *Juju* about it. The trio's other member, Jacknife Lee is best known as a producer for artists like Snow Patrol and Taylor Swift, but he began as the guitarist for fiery post-punks Compulsion, so he fits in artistically, as well as a production mediator between Tolhurst's studied playing and Budgie's more improvisational style.

It results in a dub drum mood most familiar from early-90s clubs like Megadog, where Back To The Planet and Dreadzone ruled. Activist artist and freestyler Lonnie Holley's crusty rap on *Bodies* sounds like it's about to segue into Future Sound Of London at any moment.

Loosely from the same era, The Edge's uplifting guitar distortion in *Noche Oscura* is straight from the shiny world of U2's *Achtung Baby* Perfecto remixes, while Bobby Gillespie revisits the spacey boom of Primal Scream's dub album *Echo Dek* on *Country Of The Blind*, though he's in steelier form on the shamanic intensity of *Ghosted At Home*.

LCD Soundsystem are unmatched at getting percussion to kickstart a track, so it's no wonder James Murphy slots right into *Los Angeles*' title song, resembling an emo take on LCD's *North American Scum*. The standout vocalist, Modest Mouse's Isaac Brock, brings a euphoric pop feel to hypnotic floorfiller *We Got To Move*.

Perhaps too reliant on guest vocalists to have a fully-formed identity, LTxBxJL still manage to make the listener have almost as much fun as the trio themselves. There's room for future adventures on this form, too.

Forget clichéd muso jokes about drummers, this is two goths in perfect sync. **JE**

DOLLY PARTON
ROCKSTAR

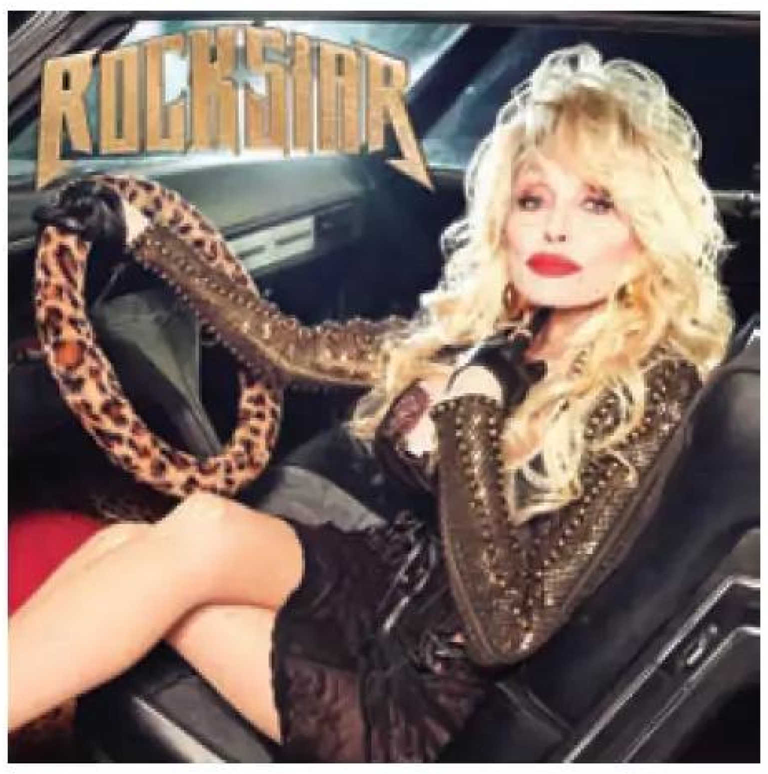
BUTTERFLY/BIG MACHINE

★★★★

© Vijat Mohindra

Woe betide anyone who underestimates Dolly Parton or calls her bluff. Upon her 2022 induction into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame, the country icon declared to *Billboard*: "I've always wanted to do a great rock album, and I'm going to do that."

The gesture wasn't *totally* out of left field – after all, she's covered Neil Young and The Beatles before – and her career is full of detours into disco and pop. But many still wondered whether Dolly could pull off such an audacious sonic curveball.



Well, wonder no more. On *Rockstar*, which features mostly covers and a smattering of originals, Parton's dedication to the rock theme is mighty impressive. So, too, is the star power she's recruited, including Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr (reworking *Let It Be*, no less), Elton John, P!nk, Stevie Nicks, and mega-fan Rob Halford of Judas Priest.

Parton naturally sounds most relaxed on songs in her comfort zone: country-leaning rock tracks (a smoky cover of Bob Seger's *Night Moves* with Chris Stapleton; a stellar, twang-kissed take on *Every Breath You Take* with Sting) and gospel (a solemn version of *Purple Rain*).

However, she more than holds her own on ferocious cover collaborations with Joan Jett (*I Hate Myself For Loving You*) plus Pat Benatar and Neil Giraldo (*Heartbreaker*), and a frothy, faithful take on *Heart Of Glass* with Debbie Harry.

A lovely duet with Simon Le Bon on Parton's own *My Blue Tears* from 1971 is the album's highlight; the Irish folk-tinged tune blooms into an electrified power ballad, giving Le Bon and Parton the chance to soar vocally and show off tender emotional range.

At 30 songs, *Rockstar* could most certainly stand to lose a few of the weaker tracks – a sleepy version of *Baby I Love Your Way* and an uneven take on REO Speedwagon's *Keep On Loving You* both add nothing.

Parton also occasionally takes liberties with the rock'n'roll theme. But these are minor quibbles on an album that's both an enjoyable listen *and* great fun. **Annie Zaleski**

JOHNNY MARR
SPIRIT POWER: THE BEST OF

BMG

★★★★

An inveterate singles lover, Johnny Marr says in the sleevenotes of his first solo compilation how important it is to write songs that "sound good in the daytime" like the Blondie and Motown seven-inches that he grew up on.

That's both a decent description of pop itself, and a summary of the material picked from his first solo decade. Even the two new songs, *Somewhere* and *The Answer*, fizz with energy: the former an arena-ready anthem with a terrific use of the phrase "Get-go", the latter proving Marr is still a scuzzball at heart.

You can trace the progression of Marr's songwriting and vocals if you want, but the seemingly random running order means it's best just to glory at how his solo work was on-point from the start: it's debatable whether there's been a better guitar-pop song since *Easy Money* in 2014.

In addition to the deluxe edition's demos and alternative versions, *Spirit Power* houses euphoric standalone single *Armatopia* plus a surprisingly effective cover of Depeche Mode's *I Feel You* and Maxine Peake collaboration *The Priest*, where the actor recites an increasingly murky story over Marr's increasingly murky disco.

Everyone knows The Smiths were pretty good at singles. If you weren't aware already, here's a chance to catch up on just how good their guitarist remains at concise pop music. **JE**

THE STREETS
THE DARKER THE SHADOW THE BRIGHTER THE LIGHT

679

★★★

Mike Skinner's second LP since reviving The Streets' name in 2017 is far less collaborative than 2020's *None Of Us Are Getting Out Of This Life Alive*. While that return eased his wise geezer vocals among Greentea Peng, Ms Banks, Donae'o and a host of newcomers, Skinner is the undoubted mainman here, with associates Rob Harvey and Kevin Mark Trail the only other voices, besides Hackney rapper Teef getting flirty on *Funny Dream*.

The soundtrack to his first film as director, Skinner's paean to clubland isn't quite the dance assault you'd expect. Indeed, the album shines when at its quirkiest, with the title track built on the music-hall of later The Specials and *Something To Hide* bouncing along on Trail's easy-going charm over a vintage dancehall bassline.

Even when he first emerged, Skinner was slightly removed from the middle of clubland hedonism, aware of the pitfalls enough to be able to dissect them. It means his lyrics have aged appropriately – but that's not always the case for his beats. What sounded thrillingly raw in 2002 can now feel primitive. *Each Day Gives* and *Someone Else's Tune* bring a turbocharged menace just right for Skinner's storyline, but much of what precedes it sounds like amiable reminiscence, rather than vital insider guide. **JE**

AGNETHA FALTSKOG
A+

BMG

★★

With the unfinished business of the Abba reunion wrapped up, Agnetha has acquired the taste for retracing her own footsteps. But quite why her most recent solo album has been re-recorded (sorry, 'reimagined') on the occasion of its 10th anniversary is unclear. The original *A* was a fine addition to the Abba icon's sparse solo discography, a classy collection of songs that nodded respectfully towards her past whilst pulling off the difficult trick of sounding both modern and timeless. But someone has decided that that's not enough.

That someone has doubtless also had the bright idea of turning *When You Really Loved Someone* into an R&B jam, complete with tinny drums and chipmunk backing vocals. The once low-key but charming *Back On Your Radio* is now a bouncy reggaeton monstrosity and the album's widescreen closer *I Keep Them On The Floor Beside My Bed* sounds like it's been 'reimagined' on a cheap Casio keyboard. And there is something truly dispiriting about one of the 20th Century's greatest voices being slathered with autotune on *A*'s disco homage, *Dance Your Pain Away*.

The one all-new track, *Where Do We Go From Here*, is upbeat and pleasant enough. So why not download that (legally, of course) and, if you haven't already, purchase the original album? Please, no more reimaginings. *A+* is thoroughly C-. **Beth Simpson**

MANZANERA MACKAY
AM PM

BFD/THE ORCHARD

★★★★

Guitarist Phil Manzanera and saxophonist Andy Mackay have collaborated for more than 50 years. Although best known for their work with Roxy Music, they have also teamed up in The Explorers and released scattered projects as a duo, including 2019's *Roxymphony*, a collection of orchestral Roxy Music songs recorded live the previous year.

Given the pair's backgrounds, these projects have tended to lean into a familiar groove, rooted in jazz-pop and art-prog.

And although both genres are represented throughout their new instrumental collection – moments on closing track *Seth* even hew rather close to the seminal sophisto-pop of *Avalon* – the duo considerably expand their sonic boundaries, with dazzling results.

Accompanied at times by instruments including violin, flute, tuba and flugelhorn, as well as a drummer and bassist-keyboardist, Manzanera and Mackay weave their textured moodwork into minimalist electronica (*Ambiente*) buoyed by crisp drums (*Mat 1*) and staticky keyboards (*Yazz*).

Standout opener *Blue Skies*, meanwhile, boasts plenty of avant-garde skronk and wails to please adventurous ears.

Ambitious music like this can easily go awry, but on *AM PM* the joy of experimentation and the chemistry between Manzanera and Mackay provides the kind of sturdy foundation that leads to greatness. **AZ**

VV BROWN
AM I BRITISH YET?

YOY

★★★★

"They don't call," VV Brown preaches as her fifth album gets underway with *Break Of The Night*'s thunderous drums, "Only when they need me." It's the kind of loaded line – we all know who "they" are – that, like the album title itself, characterises this racially charged, fiercely proud examination of Black British culture, one Brown dedicates to "the underdogs" on *Marginalised.* First and foremost, however, it's a celebration – "This melanin is magical", she affirms on *Swallowing My Pride* – and consequently calls upon multiple styles, some inherited from those who came before. There's heavy dub on *Just Be*'s appreciation for the Windrush generation, the title itself a wink towards The SOS Band: cheerful reggae underpinning *Let Us Remember By*'s bitter, poetic references to genocide: and it's impossible not to hear Roots Manuva's *Witness* in *Twisted*'s stuttering rhythm.

No Fear explores the silky soul of Erykah Badu and Janelle Monae (arguably Brown's closest US counterpart), and *History*'s intro features chanting chain gangs before gospel singers welcome a triumphant invitation "To bow, take the knee". Of course, her anger and frustration are understandably transparent – "I'm no longer negro", the shuffling *Philosophy* reiterates – but the overriding sentiment is pride in her community and hope for the future. **Wyndham Wallace**

DJ SHADOW
ACTION ADVENTURE

MASS APPEAL

★★★★

Now 27 years since DJ Shadow released *Endtroducing...* it's a fair guess that, if you've only got one of his albums in your collection, it's that rich, symphonic fantasia.

Since then, Shadow has seemingly been reluctant to produce a spiritual follow-up, instead putting out a succession of fairly traditional hip-hop albums, often working with different vocalists.

Action Adventure, then, is the closest he's come to the *Endtroducing...* formula since 2002's *The Private Press.* Of the 14 tracks here, only one (the Danceteria-evoking *You Played Me*) comes with vocals. The origins for this album come from previously unplayed records from his 60,000+ vinyl collection and material culled from 200 cassettes recorded off the radio in the 80s that Shadow bought off eBay. Though he's said *Action Adventure* is close to his 1996 debut album "in terms of personality and feel", the results are less baleful than the nocturnal *Endtroducing...*

Compiled entirely through sampling, his crate-digging appears to come from a much narrower strand of 80s synth-pop than the soul/pop/rock-straddling *Endtroducing...*, which gives *Action Adventure* a peppier, lighter feel. This is the 80s reflected through the prism of 2023 and DJ Shadow's most accessible and *CP*-friendly album to date. **Steve O'Brien**

X-PRESS 2
THEE

ACID JAZZ

★★★★

Anyone who recalls David Byrne and Tim DeLaughter's classic turns on previous X-Press 2 singles may worry that their first LP since 2006 drops guest vocals completely. Don't fret: *Thee* is Rocky and Diesel gloriously going back to basics with a succession of house bangers. From *Zeven*'s sinewy bounce to the route-one whistles 'n' klaxons heartstopper *You Know (Everybody)*, the pace is as unrelenting as the hooks. Whatever caused them to pause for so long, they're undeniably back. One listen to *Phasing You Out* and shape throwing is guaranteed. **JE**

SIMPLE MINDS
NEW GOLD DREAM LIVE FROM PAISLEY CASTLE

BMG

★★★½

In 1982, Simple Minds were on the cusp of global success. The singles from *New Gold Dream*: *Promised You A Miracle*, *Glittering Prize* and *Someone Somewhere (In Summertime)*, were as polished as they were epic. At the same time, something of the post-punk experimentation of earlier years remained. It's a fascinating period in the Minds' odyssey, revisited here for Sky Arts' *Greatest Albums Live* series. A fine recording, with enough variations on the original to stop this being the Minds acting as their own tribute act. **JW**

BRIAN ENO
TOP BOY

VERVE

★★★★

As long-time music aristocracy Brian Eno appears to have little in common with the Hackney of steely Duchane (Ashley Walters) and heavy-lidded Sully (Kano), his score to London's answer to *The Wire* added a decisive, disquieting atmosphere. At times it's ambient, but not as we know it: *Overground* is pretty, but *Beauty And Danger* is quietly menacing and little of this, least of all the main theme, is soothing. There are, nonetheless, echoes of Eno's earlier work, such as *Cutting Room I* recalling aspects of *Another Green World*. **WW**

BABY QUEEN
QUARTER LIFE CRISIS

POLYDOR

★★★½

One of the main soundtrack artists of Netflix's coming-of-age drama, *Heartstopper*, London-based South African singer Baby Queen mainly fulfils her promise on this full debut. Rather than work with a sprawling team, BQ (Bella Latham) creates with producer King Ed, lending her music an intimacy and relatability that many current singer-songwriters rarely achieve. The anarchic edge of early singles *Buzzkill* (on the deluxe edition) has been smoothed off, yet there's still a pleasing bite to ensure Baby Queen's reign has a distinctive flavour. **JE**

DBA
CELESTIAL SONGS

SPIRIT OF UNICORN

★★★

While the Roger Dean-illustrated, Wakeman/Yes-evoking cover of DBA's fifth LP suggests a wallow in 70s prog waters (keyboardist Geoff Downes has been in Yes and Asia), *Celestial Songs* feels more Simple Minds than ELP. Some tracks, such as the glistening yacht rock of *Keep On Moving*, would fit onto a recent Take That album, while others, including *Beyond The Stars*, sound like they'll one day become someone's *Britain's Got Talent* audition. With most around the four-minute mark, Lana Del Rey/Marc Almond songwriter Chris Braide ensures this is more pop than prog. **SO**

CO-PILOT
ROTATE

DELL'ORSO

★★★★½

Sometimes, the best records are the ones you didn't know you needed. The debut from Co-Pilot, aka Manchester songwriter Alan Roberts (Jim Noir) and Leonore Wheatley of International Teachers Of Pop, is a case in point. Driven primarily by woozy, retro-sounding synths, *Rotate* has an off-kilter DIY feel and conveys a sense of friends having fun. But serious fun, because highlights such as the pop-inflected *Move To It*, the spiralling *Can You See* or the wistful *Cornerhouse* are, on closer inspection, artfully arranged and imaginative sound collages. One of the best LPs of 2023. **JW**

DAVID HOLMES
BLIND ON A GALLOPING HORSE

HEAVENLY

★★★

After producing Noel Gallagher and Primal Scream, plus making numerous soundtracks, Holmes finally releases his first solo album since 2008. He's lost none of the wide-eyed wonder and headrush pop, with *You Will Know Me By The Smell Of Onions* a dizzying drama. Too reliant on vocalist Raven Violet at times, her smoky drawl overly familiar from Holmes' recent music, the pair combine for several escapist anthems, while the title track's spoken melodrama is compelling. Not quite *Let's Get Killed* levels of wonder, but it's still great to have Holmes back. **JE**

MAGNETIC SKIES
EMPIRE FALLING

VIA BANDCAMP

★★★★

Formed back in 2019 as a studio-based duo inspired by a shared love of 80s synth-driven post-punk, London-based Magnetic Skies deliver their long-awaited debut album as a fourpiece – and it's well worth the wait. Glacial, analogue electronic textures abound, often melded with juggernaut choruses. That's best evidenced via the soaring *You Shine On*, while the Cure-like gravitas of *Suffocate*, the shimmering *Outside*, and bass-driven *Fading Lights* are further highlights. Propulsive and melodic, their songcraft impresses throughout. **Steve Harnell**

© Randee St Nicholas

NOV/DEC 2023 CLASSIC POP BEST REISSUE

PRINCE & THE NEW POWER GENERATION
DIAMONDS AND PEARLS

NPG/WARNER

★★★★★

THE GOLD STANDARD OF BOXSETS IS BACK, THIS TIME SHOWING HOW PRINCE'S BIGGEST POP STATEMENT COULD HAVE GONE IN MANY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

It's possible to overthink *Diamonds And Pearls.* It's not a psychedelic adventure like *1999* or the state of the nation exploration of *Sign O' The Times.* By Prince standards, it's very much 'One for the record company', to atone for *Graffiti Bridge* overreaching.

The climax of Prince staying in line was delivering *Gett Off* when Warner told him the album needed a single. Prince was understandably put out, but Warner were right: *Gett Off* is wonderfully bracing, Prince at his most route-one funky. It's up there with Elbow's *One Day Like This* and David Bowie's *Starman* as 'We need a single here' songs written to order.

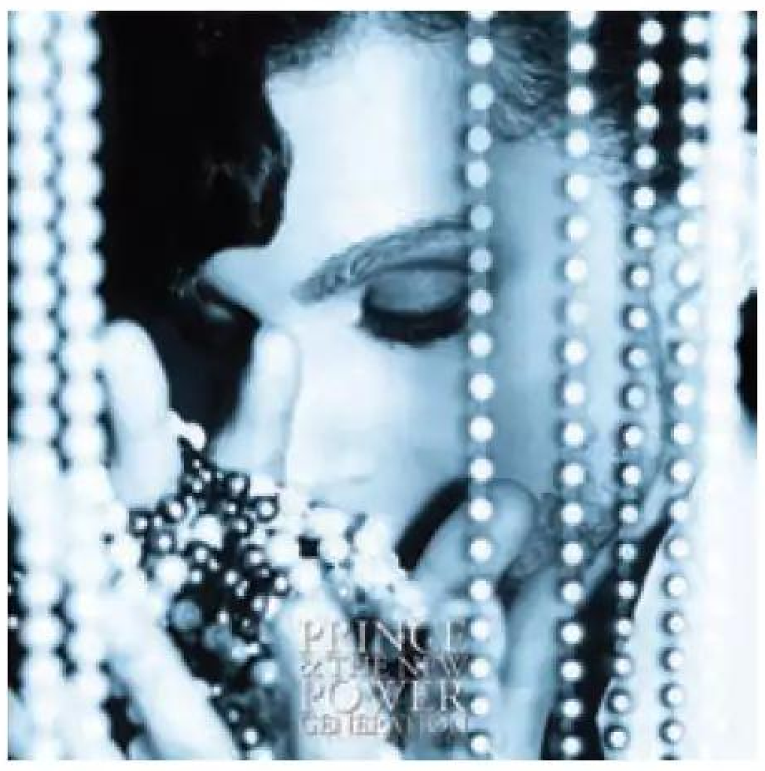
Having become reclusive when *Graffiti Bridge* wasn't going to plan, *Diamonds And Pearls* is Prince stepping back out into the world. It's less 'Prince goes hip-hop' than his Minneapolis homage, with new band The New Power Generation largely comprising long-time friends from the area. For the first time, Prince mostly recorded with his band in the studio, rather than doing everything himself and layering it up later.

The spontaneity brings a louche mood throughout. *Cream* is god-tier Prince for teasing sexuality, brought home by an early take among the extras where he instructs NPG how to play it: even more than Prince's solo demos, this is hearing a giant's creativity in action.

Nor is this exclusively a pop album anyway. Alongside the rumbling funk of *Thunder,* the one-two jazz and blues sashay of *Strollin'* and *Willing And Able* is Prince dashing off blissful, chilled classics with the minimum of fuss.

Thankfully, the return after three years of Prince's all-encompassing boxsets hasn't lessened their quality. You can believe *1999* and *Sign O' The Times* were the first batch of songs Prince had to hand. This time, the additional 25 tracks that didn't make the cut were left off for a reason. *I Pledge Allegiance To Your Love* is masterful BB King blues, *Letter 4 Miles* wild instrumental jazz, *Hold Me* shivering gospel, *Get Blue* whispered R&B... All are great songs, but they don't really have the zest of *Daddy Pop* or the imperious grandeur of *Diamonds And Pearls*' title track. Quite simply, they don't fit.

To complete the essential pull, the first public NPG show from Prince's Minneapolis club, Grand Slam, is also sensational. More vaudeville revue than rock gig, it's Prince as ringleader rather than one-man army. Knowing full well the state's strict curfew laws, the police arriving while Prince is in the middle of *Gett Off* at 1am is wonderful showmanship. Other brilliant Prince albums would follow, but he'd never be in step with the public in quite the same way again as this. **John Earls**



NEW ORDER
SUBSTANCE 1987

WARNER

★★★★★

© Anton Corbijn

One of the all-time great singles compilations, *Substance 1987* shouldn't work: it features the 12" versions of New Order's previous 11 singles, rather than the casual fan-friendly radio edits. It ends on an early example of a new single specially recorded for a hits album. Most of those are phoned in: New Order, however, dashed off *True Faith*, still the greatest example of the genre.

Two of the hits, *Temptation* and *Confusion*, were re-recorded for the compilation. Normally an absolute non-starter of an idea, the new versions really are better than the ones they supplant, so that 36 years later it can jar when the reedier originals come on.

The original edition's second CD added the relevant B-sides. The pre-*Blue Monday* singles featured some interesting early experiments. Yet, bar the elegant mystery of the epic *Murder* on *Thieves Like Us*, New Order mostly added instrumentals and remixes on their B-sides. So it was doubly astonishing that *True Faith* was backed by *1963*: a serious contender for the greatest ever standalone B-side, until New Order ruined it by releasing *1963* as a single in 1995, the absolute clots.

With so many of their singles having been released as standalones not featuring on any albums, it was no wonder *Substance 1987* triumphed: it remains their biggest-selling album, even though it's been unavailable on vinyl for decades. That's thankfully been solved, while a stunning new expanded 4CD set adds also a disc of additional contemporaneous remixes (including the four cassette-only mixes from *Substance 1987*'s original release) and a superb one-off 1987 singles show from Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre in California. For the first time since New Order began their reissue series, there's no deluxe boxset, but when it's all about the no-filler singles, who cares?

An early example of the CD era getting it just right, *Substance 1987* remains the definitive 12" hits set. Unlimited respect to anyone who can now properly update it to include up to the *Music Complete* era. **JE**

BRYAN FERRY
MAMOUNA

BMG

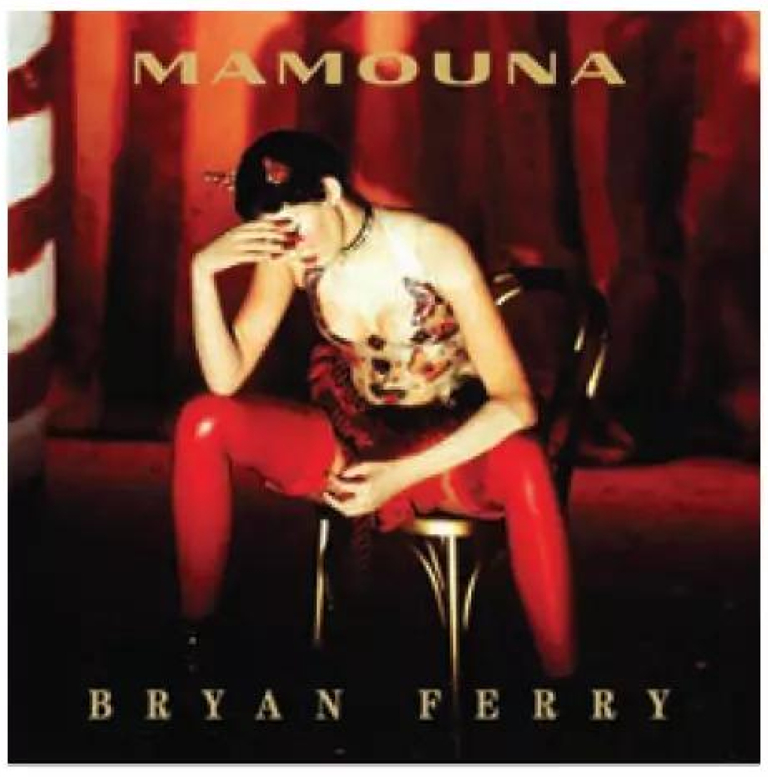
★★★★

© Getty

That Bryan Ferry's 1994 album is newly expanded into a 3CD/2LP set shouldn't be a big deal. However, marking 50 years since solo debut *These Foolish Things*, *Mamouna* is the first ever expanded edition, of either Roxy Music or Ferry's solo work.

It's also been done to finally release *Horoscope*, the album Bryan abandoned halfway in the seven-year gap between *Bête Noire* and *Mamouna*. Famously, Ferry had writers' block, ditching *Horoscope* to instead make covers album *Taxi* as a stopgap.

Considering Ferry's reputation as Britain's most fastidious pop icon, letting us hear *Horoscope*, even 30 years later, is rather remarkable. But you can see why Ferry is finally showing his workings: while *Mamouna* has more intricate, atmospheric versions than the four songs it shares with *Horoscope*, it's also clear that the unfinished album had plenty of promise in its own



right. Lighter and more relaxed than the immaculately poised *Mamouna*, the scrapped album was definitely on the right track: it didn't help that it was being made when grunge and Britpop were emerging, so that Ferry was seen as a daft old posho best ignored, rather than an elegant soul who should be adhered to, dammit.

Whatever Virgin's A&R mistakes, the finished *Mamouna* is a luxurious indulgence, making fine use not just of sessioners including Nile Rodgers, Maceo Parker and Steve Ferrone but also old Roxy Music bandmates Andy Mackay, Phil Manzanera, Guy Pratt and even Brian Eno, noodling about owlishly behind his singer again on whipsmart *The 39 Steps*.

It's not perfect – you can hear writer's block in every syllable of the leaden *Your Painted Smile* – but this is an old roué living his best life and letting the listener share it for 50 minutes.

Horoscope is a fascinating addition to how Ferry arrived at such sophistication, though CD3's demos is perhaps oversharing. We all know even someone of Ferry's class has to start somewhere, but hearing his instrumental keyboard demos is as jarring as seeing him in a tracksuit. **JE**

© Peter Ashworth

SOFT CELL
NON-STOP EROTIC CABARET

UMC/MERCURY-EMI

★★★★★

ONE OF THE GREAT UNDERDOG POP ALBUMS GETS A BOXSET AS ECCENTRIC AS THE ORIGINAL, WITH ENJOYABLY ODD EXTRAS JOINING THE VINTAGE SEEDINESS

As Soft Cell recently told *Classic Pop*, the idea that, when they were making their debut album, it would one day receive a lavish and important boxset was utterly absurd. Few records have better embodied Noel Coward's maxim, "Extraordinary how potent cheap music is", than Soft Cell's *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret*, made for about £2.50 and a couple of Twix when Marc Almond and Dave Ball were living in Leeds bedsits near where the Yorkshire Ripper was about to finally be apprehended.

Almond has retained an outsider spirit throughout his career, but this debut was the last time he really was existing all alone in Bedsitland. If *Bedsitter* is the album's ultimate tale of romanticising desolate despair, then the breakneck *Chips On My Shoulder* personifies Marc's more defiant core. Almond snarls against authority in a manner that's absolutely punk, precisely because Ball is firing off precision-targeted riffs on moody synths behind his frontman, rather than with knock-off Sham 69 guitars.

Although meeting in Leeds, Soft Cell's upbringing in North West seaside towns is rarely far from the surface: has ever a big old hit single sounded more like an out-of-season promenade than *Say Hello, Wave Goodbye*, a grandeur trying to convince its makers as much as the listener, which is also at the forefront of *Youth* and the bored bravado of *Entertain Me*.

If it's obvious within the first two seconds of *that* keyboard intro to *Tainted Love* that Soft Cell were going to be popstars, then someone forgot to tell the duo themselves, as it's still hilarious that the same album also houses the magnificently deviant *Sex Dwarf*.

That spirit of underdogs proclaiming their genius, only to be startled when the rest of the world agrees, is wonderfully backed up by the extras on this 6CD set marking *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret*'s, er, 42nd anniversary.

All the original 12" mixes are present, including murkier adventures for B-sides such as *Facility Girls* and the Dave Ball fitness-workout vibe of *So*. Also included are instrumentals and demos for every song *and* – in line with the recent **Happiness Now Extended* album – new lengthened mixes, too, half of which appeared on 2018's *Keychains And Snowstorms: The Soft Cell Story* boxset.

With 2021's tour of *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* already celebrated with a Hammersmith Apollo live album, the run's homecoming at Leeds Academy forms CD6, leaving CD3's 20 rarities: a disc whose array of BBC live sessions, *Flexipop* and Richard X remixes and demos of B-sides could also have been marketed as a deluxe edition on its own. Not so much an erotic boxset as a panoply of absolute filth. **JE**

KIRSTY MacCOLL
SEE THAT GIRL 1979-2000

UMC

★★★★

It could have been so different. If Kirsty MacColl hadn't left Stiff Records to record *Desperate Character*, her lauded 1981 debut LP, only to be dropped before her second album... If, after leaving Polydor, Stiff hadn't gone bankrupt, leaving her in legal limbo... If others working with her, or covering her songs, hadn't overshadowed her own recordings... If her diversity were seen as strength, not weakness, and her playfulness

viewed as appealing instead of a novelty... And then, most poignantly, if she had not been run down while peacefully swimming in 2000.

All these scenarios play out listening to this new 8CD boxset filled with classic singles, admirable album tracks, demos, sessions and live recordings.

Obviously, a Best Of might serve newcomers more efficiently to encounter evergreens such as MacColl's unforgettable Billy Bragg cover of *A New England*, *Walking Down Madison*'s embrace of early-90s breakbeats, and *There's A Guy Works Down The Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis*, also available in American form where he works down a truck stop.

But hers and Shane MacGowan's *Fairytale Of New York* and Bragg and Johnny Marr's *Greetings To The New Brunette* only boost its appeal,

© Getty

while the range of unreleased and rare material – including a rendition of *Miss Otis Regrets* recorded with the 1st Battalion of The Irish Guards, and a cover at Glastonbury, of The Smiths' *You Just Haven't Earned it Yet, Baby* – is impressive.

It's also matched by an enviable, illuminative introduction to her guest appearances and collaborations, including Happy Mondays, Tracy Ullman, Alison Moyet, Holly Johnson, and her folk singer father, Ewan MacColl.

Still, the real draw is 1983's unforgivably unreleased, New Wave-influenced album *Real*. *Bad Dreams* is *Scary Monsters* wonky, *Annie* triumphantly Bananarama-esque, while *Camel Crossing* is experimentally Japan-like, and *Lullaby For Ezra* delivers airy synth-pop. *Up The Grey Stairs*' hypnotic, extended groove, meanwhile, points to further 'what ifs'. In a career straddling multiple styles, it's an album that should have been a highlight long ago. **Wyndham Wallace**

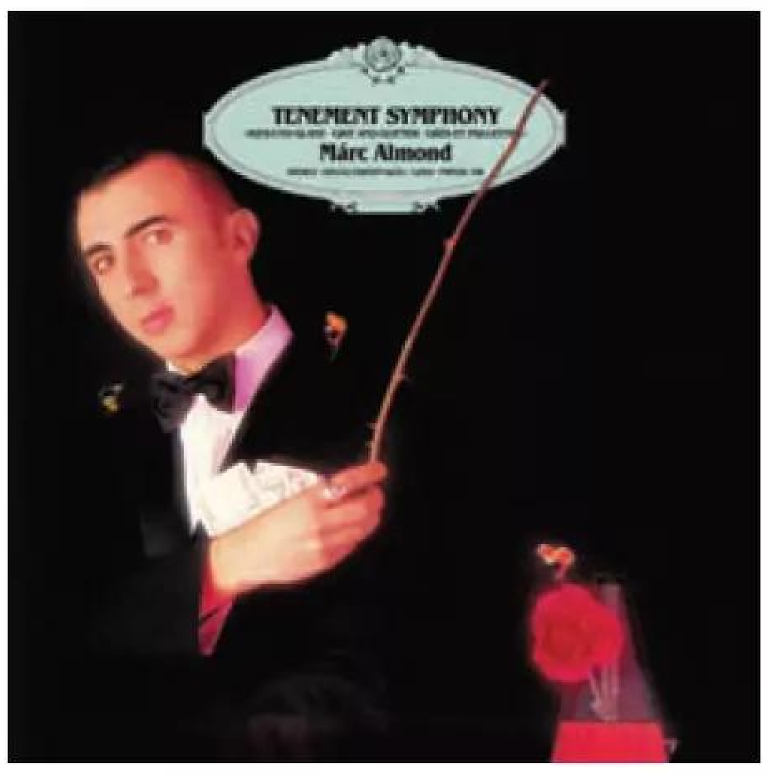
MARC ALMOND
TENEMENT SYMPHONY

SFE

★★★★

On joining Warner from Parlophone, Marc Almond's new label boss Rob Dickins wanted "the definitive Marc Almond" album. Almond was produced for the first time by Trevor Horn – as well as reunited with Dave Ball, via two songs produced by The Grid. Together with his long-time arranger Billy McGee and Nigel Hine, Almond co-produced three songs, too.

If you're struggling to keep up, so was Almond: the singer now views *Tenement Symphony* as



"Two different mini-albums" that don't hang together. While the eclecticism can thrill, you can see Marc's point: rather than definitive, songs like *Vaudeville And Burlesque* feel like they're trying too hard to be A Moment.

Neon-lit romance *Meet Me In My Dream* was a bright mid-paced groove with The Grid while, produced by Horn, *My Hand Over My Heart* was Almond/Ball going straight for the extravagance of *Torch*.

The album's Horn half is more convincing, with its covers – of Jacques Brel's *Jacky* and Irish singer David McWilliams' French hit *The Days Of Pearly Spencer* – becoming instant Almond classics. Trevor's luxurious approach is so right for Almond, it's a shame they've waited until Horn's forthcoming solo album to get back in the studio.

If *Tenement Symphony* frustrates Marc, at least the new reissue is faultless: the boxset

comprises six CDs *and* a DVD containing three videos plus TV shows demonstrating Almond's variety on *Wogan*, *Pebble Mill* and *Bruce Forsyth's Guest Night*.

Those bonus CDs include demos, backing tracks, single edits, B-sides – with *Bruises* yet another promising direction the album could have taken – 19 live songs (a grandiose *Champagne* suiting its location at Leicester Cathedral), a glamorous cover of *Like A Prayer* from famed *NME* compilation *Ruby Trax*, and 23 remixes.

Of those extended versions, Phil Harding and Ian Curnow add extra gallop to *Jacky*, the 12" Techno Remix does interestingly illicit things to *Beautiful Brutal Thing* and Trevor Horn brings further louche layers in his Grit And Glitter Mix of *My Hand Over My Heart*. There's so much to choose from of the era, Almond can be forgiven for getting a little lost in the weeds. **JE**

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VARIOUS
NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL MUSIC 40 YEARS VOL 1-4/NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL 40 YEARS

NOW

★★★★★ / ★★★★½

NOW CELEBRATES ITS 40TH ANNIVERSARY BY CHERRYPICKING THE BEST FROM 115 OF THE BRAND'S COMPILATIONS, WITH ALL THE MAJESTY THAT YOU WOULD EXPECT

Nostalgia being what it is, 40 years in music can feel like both forever ago and yesterday. One long-standing figure at the forefront of the pop coalface throughout is the NOW brand. Since November 1983, it's been a constant that's become a well-loved staple of chart-loving households, reflecting back at what's hot and popular three times a year pretty much ever since.

With a loyal fanbase of several generations, it's only right that NOW gets to celebrate its success. And *what* a celebration. 'Amazing' barely touches the sides in trying to describe this gaiety.

If you just want to send a card, *Now That's What I Call 40 Years* is a perfect summation, from *Karma Chameleon* through to *Padam Padam*. Those two huge tunes bookend the 100-track 5CD and 43-track 3LP.

If you fancy the full bells and whistles and want to really spoil yourself, the four *40 Years* volumes each have 3CDs or 3LPs, totalling 250 tracks (or 175 across the vinyl). It's an absolute orgy of the best of pop music from the last 40 years, with each detailing a decade's range, and featuring tracks from the original NOW albums.

Volume 1 covers 1983-93, with the cream of the 80s and all the variety that entails: Wham!, Pet Shop Boys, Frankie Goes To Hollywood, Bananarama, S'Express, Queen, Inner City. It edges into the 90s with Adamski, Sinéad O'Connor and The KLF, before closing with Sade's opulent mooder *No Ordinary Love*.

Volume 2 rounds up 1993-2003, with an equally varied selection of Meat Loaf, Spice Girls, The Prodigy and Cher, heading into the new millennium with pop and soul corkers by S Club 7, Atomic Kitten, Mary J Blige, Girls Aloud and Liberty X.

Volume 3's treats of 2003-13 shows what a strange time it was for pop culture. Greats like Outkast and Kelis were at their height, but we also had to endure Psy. At least there was room for outsiders like Scissor Sisters to have actual hits. Plus: *Call Me Maybe*. Yes please.

Anyone who doubts the sturdiness of modern pop music should be sent away with Volume 4. Dua Lipa, Billie Eilish, LF System and Christine And The Queens are just a few of the imperious pop turns who are dismissing such piffle.

As you've come to expect with these NOW packages, there are glorious facts about all involved. With at least one track from NOW 1-115, there's genuinely something for everyone. Here's to the next 40 years. **Ian Wade**

VARIOUS
NOW EIGHTIES DANCEFLOOR: HI-NRG & POP/NOW 12″ 80s: 1981/ NOW YEARBOOK 88/ NOW YEARBOOK 73 EXTRA

UMC

★★★★½ / ★★★★★

★★★★½ / ★★★★★

The NOW team would have been justified in putting their feet up to smoke celebratory cigars after delivering their 40th birthday compilations to the nation. Instead, here's the launch of another 80s series proving they are nowhere near exhausting the decade for goodness just yet.

In focusing on Hi-NRG and pop, the first *Eighties Dancefloor* is an ecstatic celebration. It's got the big hitters – *Relax, Venus, Don't Leave Me This Way* – but is more impressive for sneaking in long-lost bangers like Barbara Pennington's *All American Boy* and Sheryl Lee Ralph's *In The Evening* without interrupting the flow. NOW know what they're doing, so here is the legendary *Male Stripper* in its proper context: sandwiched between Divine and Bronski Beat.

In keeping to the single versions, there's no crossover with *12″ 80s* getting into its stride. Starting off with the incredible Night Version of *Planet Earth* is a statement of intent, a standard kept up by the era of building longer stories from songs: *Wordy Rappinghood, Bedsitter, Physical* and *Favourite Shirts (Boy Meets Girl)* all have sections entirely unfamiliar from their single edits. Again, the obscurities are perfectly chosen from The Whispers, The Jones Girls and Hi-Gloss, while on this form it's hard to work out why *Play To Win* didn't make stars of Heaven 17 much earlier.

The two *Yearbook* additions are as great as you'd hope, too. 1988's CD2 alone, going from PWL to rave to MOR and AOR means it runs from *I Should Be So Lucky* to *Candle In The Wind* with no missteps. Siouxsie And The Banshees into Sinéad O'Connor is especially powerful on CD3, while there's room for everyone from The Mission to Sabrina.

For any 80s heads who believe 1973 won't be for them, the recent *Yearbook 73* should have persuaded you otherwise, with *73 Extra* showing what a mighty pop year it was. The 10-song glam run opening CD1 forms a joyful army taking over your speakers, before the lushness of Carly Simon, pop rock power of Argent and Albert Hammond and the extravagant cheese of Tony Christie and Dawn exemplify the charts had plenty for all tastes. **JE**

© Getty

HOWARD JONES
CELEBRATE IT TOGETHER

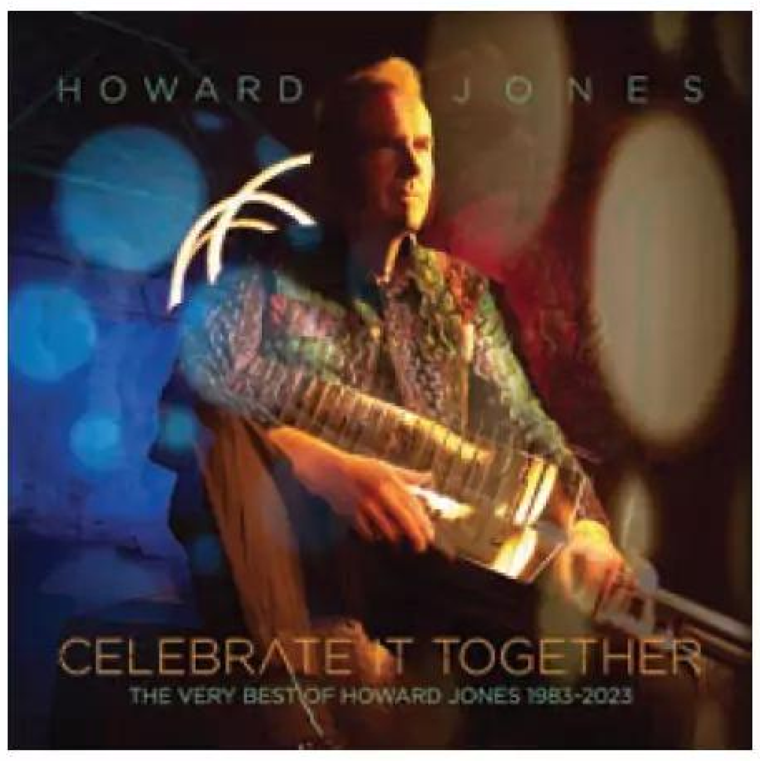
CHERRY RED

★★★★

It's perfectly fitting that Howard Jones' 4CD 40-year boxset begins with the sparkling soul-pop strut *Things Can Only Get Better*. Since crashing the charts in August 1983 with peerless synth-pop singalong *New Song*, the Bucks-raised artist has kept his creative compass pointed firmly towards the future.

Also available in 2CD or 2LP editions, *Celebrate It Together* has the usual combination of hits, rare tracks, video mixes and alternate takes. What distinguishes the 4CD is how it's arranged thematically into four distinct approaches: *Popular Hits, Electro, Chill*, and *Curiosities*. This division gives a much better overview of Jones' catalogue and range, with the *Electro* disc's propulsive, robotic *Who You Really Want To Be* and the *Chill* set's introspective *City Song* plus piano-driven *Someone You Need* standing tall.

Although not everything in the collection is essential (the *Simlish* version of *Things Can Only Get Better* from *The Sims* is charming, if *very* extraneous) *Celebrate It Together* emphasises how much Jones dislikes resting on his laurels. Collaborations with BT, as well as updates on classics – highlighted by Cedric Gervais' ecstatic 2013 EDM spin on *Things Can Only Get Better* and the minimalist 2023 Elephant Talk Remix of *New Song* – show Jones remains an eternal optimist energised by what's next, not what's been done before. **Annie Zaleski**



BILLY BRAGG
THE ROARING FORTY 1983-2023

COOKING VINYL

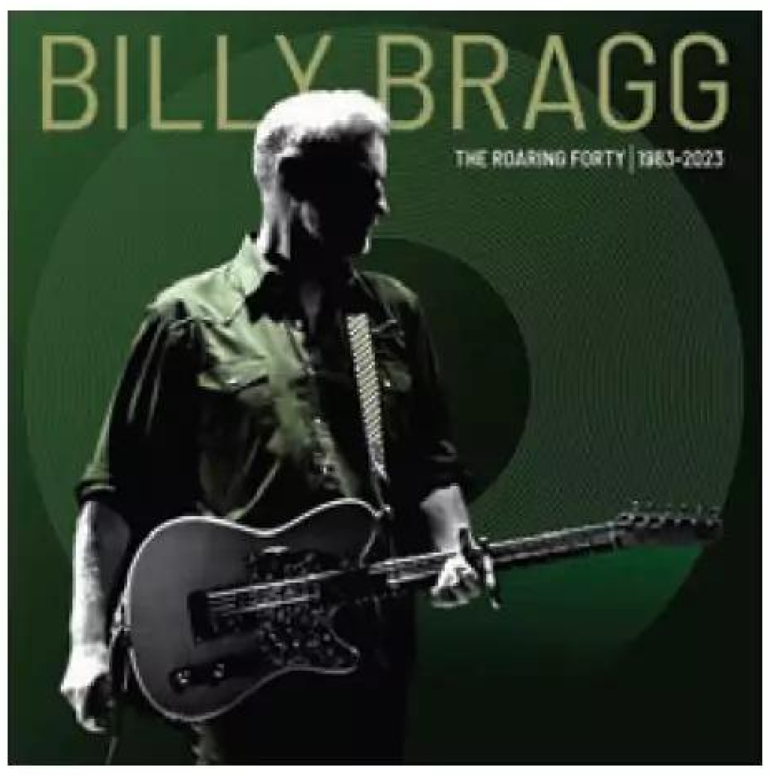
★★★★

For casual listeners, you would guess Billy Bragg is forever that bloke who, armed with a guitar, socialism and a clutch of kitchen sink dramas in song form, gatecrashed the 80s. Which he certainly did, as this career-spanning 14CD collection shows. (2CD, 3LP and 1LP versions are also available.)

Here, on the early discs, is The Bard Of Barking writ large, a man righteously angry but capable of writing songs of great tenderness. For evidence, listen to 1983's *A New England, Between The Wars* two years later, or the devastating study of stoicism and domestic violence, *Levi Stubbs' Tears* from 1986.

Billy's 90s were less successful. In particular, the dreary Bragg-by-numbers *William Bloke* in 1996 was a nadir. Rebirth lay ahead. Working with Wilco on 1998's *Mermaid Avenue*, an LP of previously unheard Woody Guthrie lyrics, Bragg began to mine a rich vein of Americana. It's an approach that's recurred in his 21st-century output, songs dealing with social justice, ageing and combatting disillusionment.

If it's the early tracks that linger longest, it's because so many are great, especially 1988's *Waiting For The Great Leap Forwards* – folk-punk's *Life On Mars?* – for the way its power and poignancy grows by the year. If you've got a blacklist, Billy Bragg still wants to be on it, for which we should all be grateful. **Jonathan Wright**



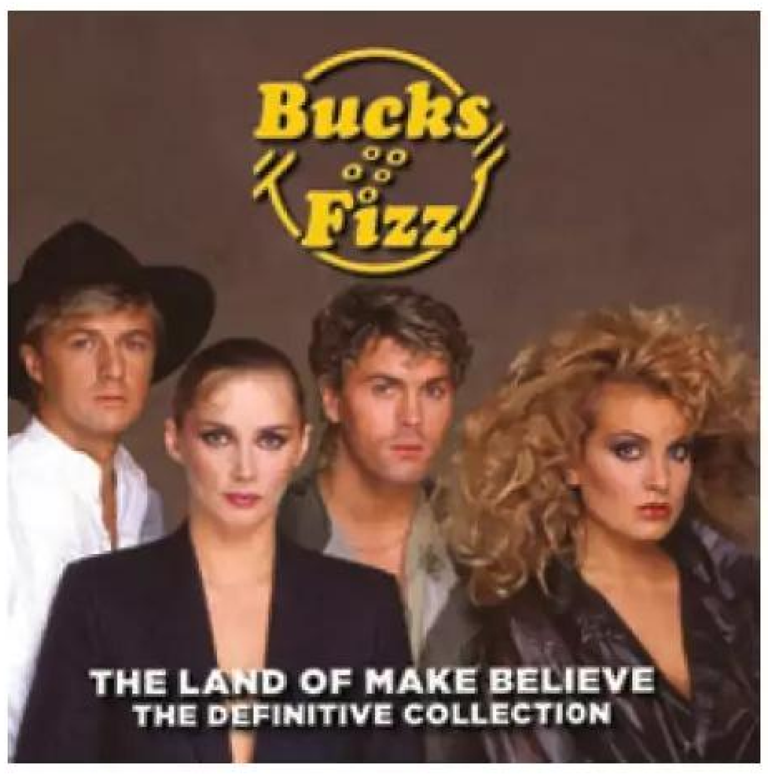
BUCKS FIZZ
THE LAND OF MAKE BELIEVE: THE DEFINITIVE COLLECTION

CHERRY POP

★★★★

How did a group thrown together for Eurovision – in the days before it was even cool – end up with a run of some of the finest pop singles of the 80s?

The answer was decent chemistry, good timing and, in Andy Hill, a prodigiously talented lead songwriter and/or producer, seemingly capable of churning out deceptively sophisticated pop bangers like *The Land Of Make Believe*, *My Camera Never Lies*



and *Talking In Your Sleep* in his… well, sleep.

As such, even the flops in this boxset – like *You And Your Heart So Blue* and the Shelley Preston-era *Heart Of Stone*, both co-writes with Pete Sinfield – feel like classics that got away (though the latter went on to be a hit for Cher).

As well as 20 singles, remastered from the original studio tapes, this 5CD set boasts all the original B-sides (mostly killer, some filler) along with 23 extended mixes, 11 of them previously unreleased. It's hard to see who the disc of instrumental backing tracks is aimed at – perhaps one of the many iterations of the group could use them as their live PA? But throw in a 28-page booklet that picks its way delicately through the whole Fizz soap opera, and this *Definitive Collection* more than lives up to its billing. **Paul Kirkley**

VARIOUS
PWL EXTENDED: BIG HITS AND SURPRISES VOL 1-2

BMG

★★★★

Only a crazed fool would now dismiss the era when Stock Aitken & Waterman basically ran pop, after Pete Waterman surmised that he could be onto a winner by offering a tasting menu of disco, Hi-NRG and Northern Soul via the medium of the boys and girls next door. SAW first appeared in 1984 and basically revolutionised everything for the next six years.

Thankfully, packages such as this are digging deeper to tell an alternative trajectory of the modern Motown. Across 3CDs or 4LPs, these 24 tracks offer readily available more-bop-than-pop reswizzles, plus rare and previously unreleased gems such as Princess' *Say I'm Your Number One (Tony King's 5 Years On 12" Mix)*, Kylie Minogue's *What Kind of Fool (12" Master Mix)* and Rick Astley's *She Wants To Dance With Me (Extended R'n'B Version)*. They sit alongside the trio's first production, the slightly ropey-yet-amazing Agents Aren't Aeroplanes' *The Upstroke*.

There's also full-length biggies such as *I Should Be So Lucky*, *Roadblock* and *Happenin' All Over Again*, alongside PWL nuggets, Shooting Party's *Safe In The Arms Of Love*, Hurley's House Mix of Paul Varney's *If Only I Knew* and Sigue Sigue Sputnik's underrated *Success (Balearacidic Mix)*. Fabulous stuff. **IW**

SCRITTI POLITTI
EARLY/WHITE BREAD BLACK BEER

ROUGH TRADE

★★★ / ★★★★★

Bookending Green Gartside's career following the re-release of Scritti Politti's other albums, his Mercury-nominated 2006 comeback *White Bread Black Beer* and 2005's US-only *Early* compilation make a return to vinyl.

Consisting of 1978 debut single *Skank Bloc Bologna* plus the EPs *2nd Peel Session* and *4 'A-Sides'*, *Early* is welcome for collectors but should be approached with caution for casuals. Even Gartside had to start somewhere. In his case, it was run-of-the-mill post-punk. The debut single and Peel Session are both overly earnest and needlessly frantic, burying Gartside's vocals in voguish choppy guitars.

The band were starting to hit the form they'd gel on 1982 debut album *Songs To Remember* by *Confidence* and *P.A.s*, on *4 'A-Sides'*, a more relaxed funk shuffle letting Gartside start to get to grips with his unhurried delivery.

Of course, despite an unexpected return to performing prior to its release, Gartside's confidence required a boost, needing seven years to deliver *White Bread Black Beer*. Although recorded at home, it's anything but a lo-fi mumble. Choose between *After Six*'s raucous glam, the R&B lounge in *No Fine Lines* or Gartside singing like only he can on comeback single, *The Boom Boom Bap*. Whatever Scritti do next, here's a chance to revisit a late-period triumph. **JE**

LEVEL 42
THE LATER YEARS 1991-1998

ROBINSONGS

★★★★

Level 42's twilight phase is inevitably overlooked compared with their 80s heyday, a far more prolific period in which they established themselves as Britain's premier jazz-funk fusion outfit. The Isle Of Wighters recorded just two albums in the following decade, before an initial split in 1994. But this comprehensive 7CD collection proves there was still life left in the old slap-bass.

1991's *Guaranteed* arrived amid the turmoil of a move from Polydor to RCA, not to mention Mark King's marital problems and the death of guitarist Alan Murphy. But it was pretty much business as usual musically, with the summery title track and follow-up singles *Overtime* and *My Father's Shoes* all worthy of a place on their previous *Level Best* compilation.

1994's *Forever Now*, however, showed they could move with the times, with the title track (their final Top 20 single to date) and harmony-laden *Love In A Peaceful World* channelling the acid jazz movement they'd helped to inspire.

The Later Years also gathers all the B-Sides, bonus tracks and remixes from this era, with the K-Klass treatments of *All Over You* and *Learn To Say No* transforming the unfashionable outfit into four-on-the-floor favourites, while Omar's 1998 reworking of *The Sun Goes Down (Living It Up)* was a welcome late addition. Whether even the most ardent of Level 42 heads needs seven versions of it remains to be seen. **Jon O'Brien**

DIRE STRAITS
LIVE 1978-1992

UMC/MERCURY

★★★★

For Dire Straits, live albums were always about more than just the chance to hear slightly muddier versions of their studio catalogue. Seminal double LP *Alchemy*, for example, captures Mark Knopfler and co at the height of their stately 'Floyd period', extending breezy early cuts such as *Sultans Of Swing* and the reggae-flavoured *Once Upon A Time In The West* into sprawling, *Love Over Gold*-style epics.

Now, that record is *even longer*, an extended, remastered version of 1983's Hammersmith Odeon show being one of the highlights of this career-spanning 12LP/8CD treasury. Valedictory live set *On The Night*, recorded in 1992, also gets the expanded treatment, while a BBC live concert from 1978 captures the early energy of their blue-collar roots rock.

Most fans, though, will head straight to *Live At The Rainbow*, a previously unreleased album of a heady 1979 show at London's Rainbow Theatre, complete with an encore of blues-rock covers featuring guest Phil Lynott.

The absence of anything from the band's mid-80s stadium pomp is striking: *Brothers In Arms* barely gets a look in. That aside, this is a comprehensive live document of an outfit whose virtuosity and gift for storytelling – long dismissed by the hard-of-thinking as dull mortgage-rock – are getting a long-overdue reappraisal. **PK**

ALTERED IMAGES
BITE

CHRYSALIS

★★★

For alternative bands championed by John Peel and the inky music press, the pop landscape of the 80s could be tough to navigate. Meanwhile, as Altered Images proved with *Happy Birthday* in 1981, the post-punk era brought opportunities to force your way into the charts, such success also brought a pressure of expectation.

This certainly seemed to affect Altered Images. Second LP *Pinky Blue* lacked energy and focus. Growing up in public was proving difficult and, with third album *Bite*, the band faced a decision: in the most simplistic terms, whether to be a rock or pop band.

As evidenced by its sleeve, showing a Clare Grogan who'd seemingly been to a stylist, Altered Images chose the latter option. Over two different recording sessions, with producers Mike Chapman and then Tony Visconti, the band honed a more polished sound.

While this gave them one of their big hits in *Don't Talk To Me About Love*, it's difficult to have much affection for *Bite*. The mournful *Another Lost Look* and power pop-inflected *Change Of Heart* are worth revisiting, but too much of the rest sounds underdeveloped – toothless, even.

A fascinating yet frustrating case of what might have been, reissued on half-speed vinyl and a 2CD set, adding 12" mixes, B-sides and single edits. **JW**

TRICKY
MAXINQUAYE

UMC/ISLAND

★★★★

Maxinquaye remains a landmark album that Tricky has yet to match in the 28 years since it was first released.

Steeped in sex, drugs, dub and blues, it's the product of a unique mind and talent, which has been rightly reissued many times since 1995. So what does this 'super deluxe' edition have over the others?

Well, it's been remastered and in this case the audio upgrade is worth it, as it brings out all sorts of nuances and colours that this reviewer had no idea were there previously.

Spread over three LPs or two CDs, there's plenty of interesting material here, including six 'reincarnated' versions from 2022 – they're radical new reinterpretations that, in some cases, bear little relation to the original versions. *Aftermath* is sweeter, more soulful; *Ponderosa*, shorn of its Tom Waits-ian percussion, is stark and minimal. Tricky is not usually praised as a songwriter, but here his craft shines through.

There's also a BBC session from 1995 and remixes galore, which range from the inspiring (Leftfield's previously unreleased version of *Brand New You're Retro*) to the, well, of its time breezy drum & bass take on *Pumpkin* by Badja.

If you've ever been curious about one of British pop's true mavericks, here is a pretty good place to start. **Beth Simpson**

VARIOUS
DISCO DISCHARGE PRESENTS BOX OF SIN

DISCO DISCHARGE/DEMON

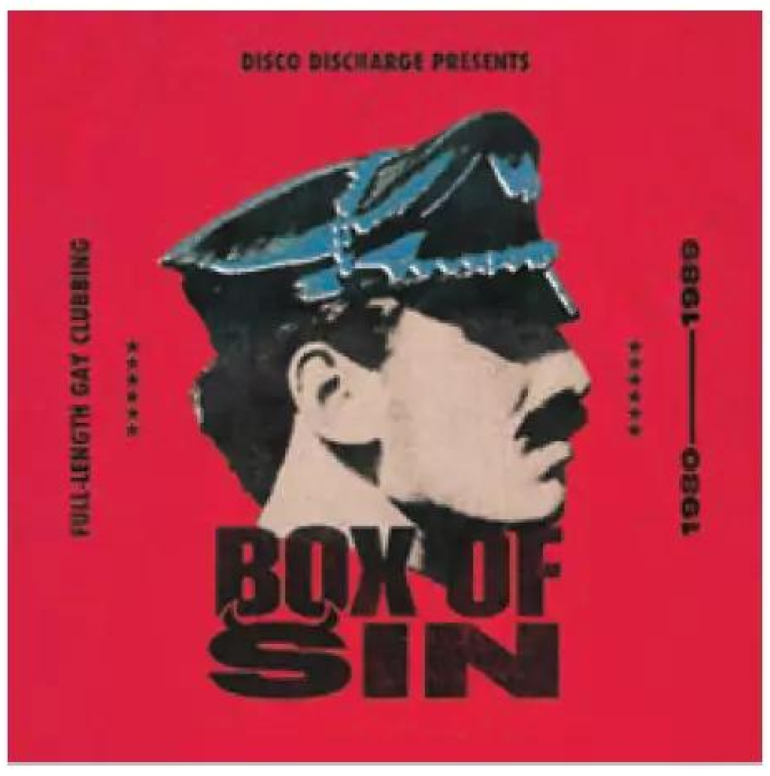
★★★★★

Box of Sin is, effectively, a decade of DANCE: an exploratory shape-throw through 80s British clubland that's heavy on gay anthems and harness-sporting Hi-NRG hoofers, in what was the advancement and evolution of club culture.

It's also lavishly packaged in paying tribute to the Disco Discharge label, with imagery from the gay nightlife of the era evoking misty water-coloured memories, and sore limbs, for anyone who was there. There's pumping strobers like Evelyn Thomas' *High Energy*, the oomphy monster of Man 2 Man's *Male Stripper* as well as the demonic charge of Dead Or Alive's Murder Mix of *You Spin Me Round* and Miquel Brown's X-rated *So Many Men So Little Time*.

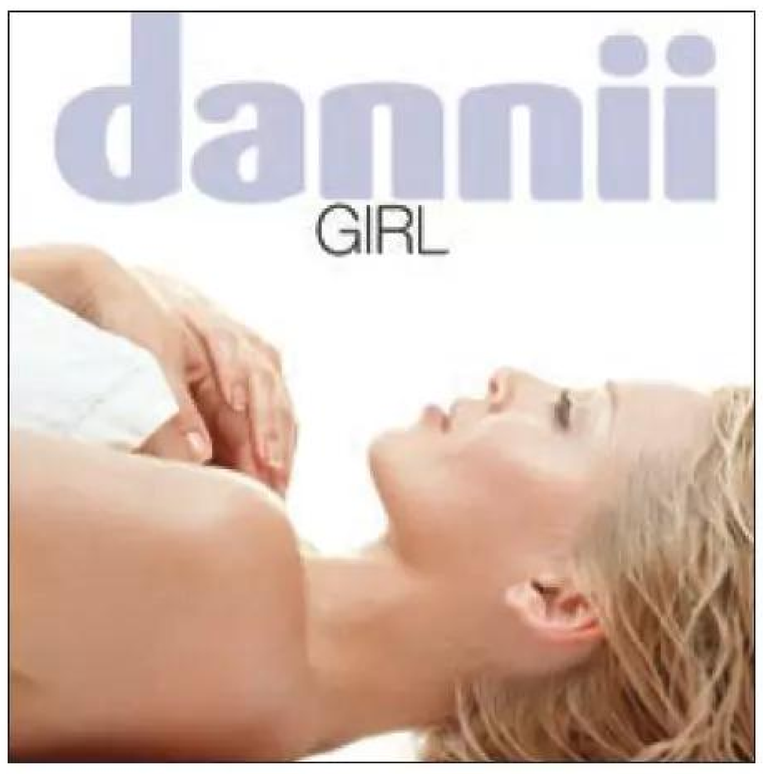
There are pop-facing reboots, too, such as the Shep Pettibone uplift of Kim Wilde's *You Came* and Bucks Fizz's world-music-on-poppers *New Beginning*. Plus, the clubbier fare of The Flirts inventing electroclash in *Passion* and the sexy menace of Gina X Performance's *No GDM*, next to old stagers-turned-ragers such as Liza Minelli's PSB-produced *Don't Drop Bombs*.

Plus, any compilation that contains all this PLUS both *Theme From S'Express* and *Relax* can only be incredible. **IW**



KENNY THOMAS
THE BEST OF
COOLTEMPO/CHRYSALIS
★★★★

There'll always be a place for artists like Kenny Thomas, a likable chap with a pure voice who made undemanding soulful pop that sounded great on FM radio. This collects all his 90s hits, plus material from an unreleased third album and assorted remixes. Detractors might dismiss this as bland, MOR fare. Indeed, there's nothing that you could remotely describe as edgy: all the corners have been smoothly rounded. But tracks like *Best Of You* and *Outstanding* slip down as easily and enjoyably as a strawberry daiquiri during happy hour. **BS**



DANNII MINOGUE
GIRL
CHERRY POP
★★★½

For a moment in 1997, when Kylie was in her indie phase, younger sister Dannii looked poised to become the dominant Minogue. Co-produced by future hit factory Xenomania, third LP *Girl* was a confident venture into everything from drum & bass and deep house to trance and techno. This 4CD reissue heads further into the clubs, with 10 remixes each of career-best singles *Disremembrance* and *All I Wanna Do* plus reworkings of *Everything I Wanted* and *Heaven Can Wait*. But it's the original material where Dannii's dance diva credentials shine. **JO**

ARTHUR BAKER PRESENTS
DANCE MASTERS: JOHN LUONGO
DEMON
★★★★

John Luongo was one of the most influential remixers of the 70s and 80s. Starting out during disco, he worked on tracks by artists as diverse as Billy Idol, Blancmange, Rick Springfield, Cabaret Voltaire and Shakin' Stevens. Accordingly, the latest in the *Arthur Baker Presents* series is nothing if not eclectic. Never unfocused, Luongo consistently hones in on what's best about the songs he's reworking and makes you listen anew even to a track as overly familiar as Tina Turner's *The Best*. **JW**

THE CRANBERRIES
TO THE FAITHFUL DEPARTED
UMC/ISLAND
★★★½

Ranging from the sublime (the full-throttle punk of *Salvation*) to the ridiculous (the tone-deaf *I Just Shot John Lennon*), The Cranberries' inconsistent 1996 album now gets the deluxe treatment. Fans will be interested in three Parisian demos recorded with first-choice producer Tim Palmer before the band decided that arena rock maestro Bruce Fairbairn could better replicate their live sound. However, the 13 tracks recorded on their troubled Free To Decide Tour prove the Irish quartet were still more exciting on stage than in the studio. **JO**

XTC
THE BIG EXPRESS
PANEGYRIC
★★★½

After 1983's *Mummer*, XTC's seventh album, now with three bonus tracks, was considered overproduced in 1984. But, compared to what the decade held in store – and perhaps thanks to Steven Wilson's new surround sound mixes – it now feels accessibly innovative, sometimes not unlike Tears For Fears. If it's too busy, that's due to an excess of ideas, from opener *Wake Up*'s post-punk-meets-post-rock to manic closer, *Train Running Low On Soul Coal*. *Shake You Donkey Up*'s wonky rhythms were even beaten out on trays, though LinnDrums are more prominent. **WW**

THE DARLING BUDS
KILLING FOR LOVE
CHERRY RED
★★★★

A riot of groove and attitude, Welsh guitar popsters were such a staple on *The Chart Show* that it's strange to note only their *Hit The Ground* made the Top 40. Andrea Lewis was defiance and insouciance incarnate across three LPs. *Crawdaddy*'s confident grooves are the pick, but *Erotica* (unluckily released two weeks after Madonna's album) showed they went out on top for spiky riffs. 2018 single *New Year* is missing, but this otherwise comprehensive 5CD set has lively 2017 comeback EP *Evergreen*, highlighting how welcome it is to have the Buds flowering again. **JE**

DEL AMITRI
CHANGE EVERYTHING
UMC/PROPER
★★★★½

Del Amitri may have prospered in the CD age, but their consciously retro West Coast sound feels right at home on 180g vinyl for this new reissue. The follow-up to their breakthrough *Waking Hours* album, 1992's *Change Everything* wrapped rootsy, radio-friendly rock and roll around the razorblade of Justin Currie's barbed lyrics. Lead single *Always The Last To Know* – a summery earworm with a sting in the tale – set the tone here, while *Surface Of The Moon*, a lovelorn lament set against the backdrop of a changing Glasgow, remains a career high. **PK**

LENE LOVICH
TOY BOX
CHERRY RED
★★★½

Lene Lovich's baroque cabaret pop might not be for everyone, but her enduring cult fanbase will delight in rummaging through this 4CD treasury, which collects everything 'The First Lady Of Stiff' released for the label in her 1978-83 New Wave pomp. Of the 81 tracks, 20 are making their CD debut, adding B-sides, demos and 12" mixes and a US-only mini-LP, *New Toy*, to freshly mastered versions of favourites like *Lucky Number* and *Say When*. The sleevenotes include extensive thoughts from an artist with a refreshingly singular take on the world. **PK**

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UB40
MOSELEY PARK AND POOL, BIRMINGHAM

27 AUGUST

★★★★

SETLIST

1. Here I Am (Come And Take Me)
2. Sing Our Own Song
3. Homely Girl
4. Tyler/King
5. Please Don't Make Me Cry
6. Champion
7. You Don't Call Anymore/Me Nah Leave Yet
8. Don't Break My Heart
9. Groovin'
10. Bring Me Your Cup
11. Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain
12. The Keeper
13. Gimme Little Sign
14. Baby
15. Cherry Oh Baby
16. I'll Be Your Baby Tonight
17. Johnny Too Bad
18. Red Red Wine

ENCORE

19. Food For Thought
20. Kingston Town
21. Can't Help Falling In Love

BRUM'S REGGAE KINGS MARK THEIR 45TH BIRTHDAY BY RETURNING TO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

A 45th birthday might not be an obvious one to go to town on, but recent years haven't exactly been plain sailing for UB40

The ongoing spat with former vocalist Ali Campbell has divided fans, while two founder members – saxophonist Brian Travers and percussionist Astro – have sadly passed away. Meanwhile, Ali's original replacement, elder brother Duncan, retired due to health problems, to be replaced by new boy Matt Doyle.

So perhaps you can't blame the pioneering Brum band for wanting to reassert their position as one of the world's biggest reggae artists, and celebrate any landmark, no matter how slight.

Tagged 'The Homecoming,' their one-day outdoor birthday party finds the remaining original members – Robin Campbell, Jimmy Brown, Earl Falconer and Norman Hassan – back in the neighbourhood where they spent their formative years, created the band, rehearsed, gigged and recorded.

Joining them to mark the occasion are local reggae act Friendly Fire Band and vibing Manchester crew The Mouse Outfit (highlighting UB40's enduring influence), as well as co-headliners Soul II Soul. The London collective are celebrating 35 years (why not?), with British soul's elder statesman, Jazzie B, still promoting his message of positivity. "You happen to be the most inspiring generation to ever live on planet earth," he tells the 4,000-capacity crowd as their slick combination of beats and strings swells over the hour set. As Jazzie steps out front towards the conclusion, and the guitar lines zig-zag across the tunes, it's hard not to draw comparisons with George Clinton and Funkadelic.

Leaving on a high (1989's chart-topping *Back To Life*, naturally), former Big Audio Dynamite man Don Letts keeps the party going with an expertly-planned DJ set of roots, dancehall and well-chosen reggae takes on tunes by Adele, Deee-Lite and Kate Bush. He reads the crowd perfectly, elevating the atmosphere before the arrival of the headliners.

Across a set of close on two hours, UB40's crowd-pleasing big hits are present and correct – *Cherry Oh Baby, Red Red Wine* etc – but so, too, are a few surprises, notably *Labour Of Love II*'s *Groovin'* and *Promises And Lies' Bring Me Your Cup*.

There's also a couple of tasters for the forthcoming album, *UB45*, with the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games anthem *Champion*, and a radio-friendly *Gimme Little Sign* – a suitably sweet cover of one-hit-wonder Brenton Wood's 1968 soul banger.

Having joined in 2021 from local act Kioko, guitarist/vocalist Doyle's arrival feels like it's reinvigorated the band. Though he shares no DNA with the Campbell brothers and comes from a much younger generation, he's clearly cut from a similar cloth. As his vocal tones (like Ali's before him) interweave perfectly with Robin's voice, Doyle brings an often overlooked soulful side back to the band – something which Duncan arguably never quite succeeded in doing.

Ending on a three-song encore, the band leave the stage to ecstatic and well-earned applause. Wonder what they've got planned for their 46th birthday? **Dave Freak**

senbla presents

© Dave Freak

DEXYS
THE CIVIC AT THE HALLS, WOLVERHAMPTON

16 SEPTEMBER

★★★★

THE EVER IDIOSYNCRATIC KEVIN ROWLAND PROMISES THE HITS. BUT FIRST THERE'S A "THEATRICAL PRESENTATION" OF DEXYS' NEW ALBUM, FROM BEGINNING TO END.

For his latest live excursion, Dexys' Kevin Rowland once again proves he's anything but predictable.

Off the back of rumours of retirement (and his highest chart placing in decades), Dexys' tour adverts state reassuringly that tonight's setlist will include "plenty from *Too-Rye-Ay*". However, before we get to that point there's "a theatrical presentation" of Dexys' new opus – the barrier-pushing concept studio album, *The Feminine Divine*.

Starting promptly at 8pm, the six-person Dexys begin with *The One That Loves You* and work through the *The Feminine Divine*'s nine tracks in regimented order.

While "theatrical presentation" might initially bring to mind notions of *West Side Story*-style antics, what we get instead are the tracks accompanied by a series of set pieces featuring a smartly dressed Rowland, and musicians, that attempt to dramatise the themes of the record. There's no cast. No stage sets. Just band members, who – around and within the songs – casually trade lines with our Kevin, pleading, even scuffling.

It does take the audience a while to buy into this odd theatre/gig hybrid. But once they're in... they're in, with penultimate number, *My Submission*, earning spontaneous whoops from awestruck fans who leap to their feet in passionate approval.

Divided into three acts, the songs broadly see Rowland challenging his previous views on women and masculinity. Meanwhile, the music also sees Dexys and Kevin sail into new waters, with gentle piano ballads and electro-funk. Welcome to yet another surprising chapter in an already surprising career, characterised by one seemingly baffling and unexpected turn after another (Dungarees? Jumpers? Ladies underwear? etc).

But by the time we get to the muted trombone and soulful minimal grooves of album closer *Dance With Me*, the entire crowd appears elated – if a tad stunned.

Heavy on *Too-Rye-Ay* material (as promised), Part Two – after a brief intermission – is an all too swift celebration of Dexys' past. Some of the previous half's theatrics stray in as Rowland suddenly appears in the middle of the audience (much to the delight of those in the stalls), while there's more call-and-response band banter before the frontman runs offstage following *Free*, only to return as *Come On Eileen* stomps in.

On home turf and in fine voice, Rowland seems visibly moved by the passion of the crowd, acknowledging the importance of former member Kevin Archer before a forceful *Geno* and, feeling unable to leave the stage after the drifting Irish ballad *Carrickfergus*, returning to *Jackie Wilson* for the second time (complete with Jocky Wilson pic).

While the subtleties of tonight's opening set may have presented challenges for some fans (and are unlikely to trouble Olivier Award judges), there's no doubting Rowland's latest turn has resulted in some of the most remarkable Dexys material ever.

And there's also no point in speculating where his muse will take him next, but a theatre-based version of *The Feminine Divine*, with additional writing, fully developed staging and direction (à la Bowie's *Lazarus*), could be well worth considering.

Dave Freak

SETLIST

1. The One That Loves You
2. It's Alright Kevin (Manhood 2023)
3. I'm Going To Get Free
4. Coming Home
5. The Feminine Divine
6. My Goddess Is
7. Goddess Rules
8. My Submission
9. Dance With Me

INTERMISSION

10. Soon/Plan B
11. I'll Show You
12. All In All (This One Last Wild Waltz)
13. Until I Believe In My Soul
14. Free
15. Come On Eileen

ENCORE

16. Geno
17. Jackie Wilson Said (I'm In Heaven When You Smile)
18. Carrickfergus
19. Jackie Wilson Said (I'm In Heaven When You Smile)

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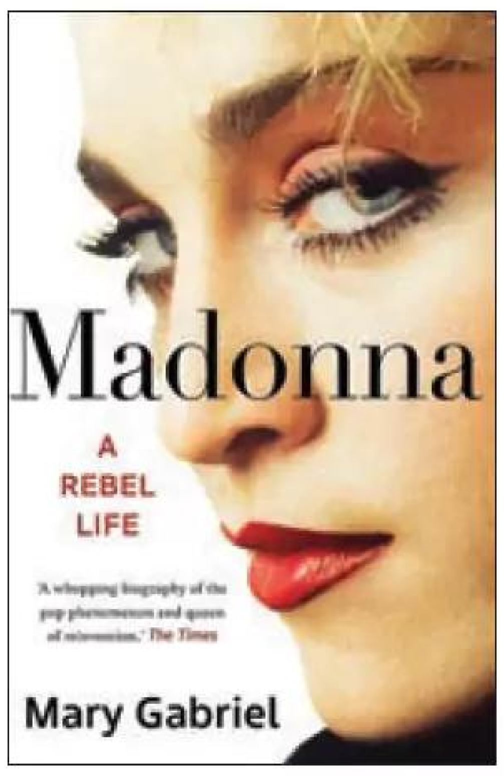
MADONNA: A REBEL LIFE
MARY GABRIEL
CORONET

★★★★½

Life is a mystery, to quote one of the Queen Of Pop's hits, but in *Madonna: A Rebel Life*, Mary Gabriel does a sterling job in demystifying the shapeshifting, boundary-breaking singer. Following her shocking health scare recently, the seemingly indestructible icon is currently marking her 40th year in music with the *Celebration Tour.* Given that this is the first time we've seen the notoriously forward-thinking maverick willingly acknowledge her legacy, the timing could not be better for this enthralling new overview.



If putting the life and career of the most successful and influential female artist in history under the microscope proved daunting for Gabriel, she doesn't show it.

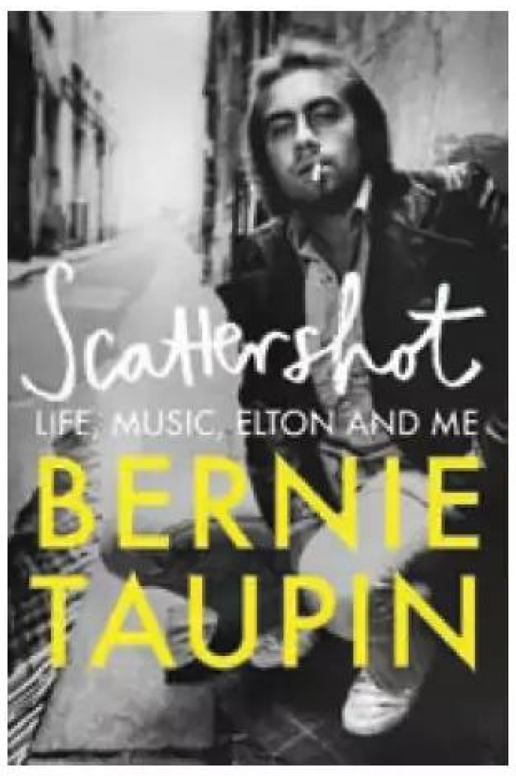
By examining the superstar's cultural roots and the environment that spawned her – New York's Downtown art scene of the late 70s – Gabriel's confident portrait penetrates the gloss and veneer to cast an academic eye over her art and activism.

The sprawling tome refreshingly eschews the gossipy nature of previous biographies, instead treating her work with the gravitas it deserves. Also, as the first Madonna book in some time, the enlightening analysis of her later work and creative direction is very welcome. At 880 pages, *A Rebel Life* revels in its attention to detail and, despite a shortage of new insight from Madonna's admittedly tight-lipped inner circle, it emerges as the definitive biography of the star to date. **Mark Lindores**

SCATTERSHOT: LIFE, MUSIC, ELTON AND ME
BERNIE TAUPIN
MONORAY

★★½

As Elton John concluded his touring life this summer amid a blaze of glory, it was bittersweet that the canon of classics he has accrued over the past 50+ years would be retired from public performance. As audiences sang along one last time, Bernie Taupin – the man who penned the lyrics to those timeless hits – was putting the finishing touches to his autobiography.



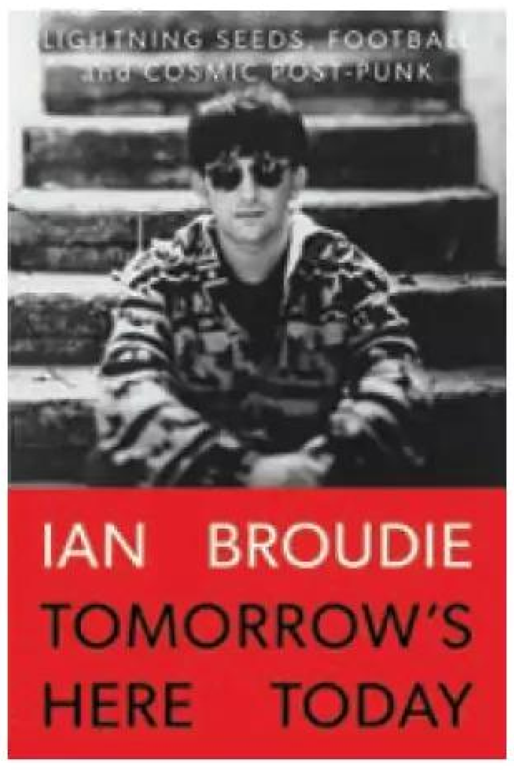
Though the story of the Elton/Bernie partnership is now well-known having been recounted in John's autobiography, *Me*, and on celluloid via *Rocketman*, it's interesting to hear Taupin's perspective and the early part of *Scattershot* is by far the most engaging. The formation of their friendship and professional partnership demands attention and lulls the reader to root for them to succeed.

Of course they do (spoiler alert!) and what follows should be an exciting journey. Instead, it comes across as slightly joyless. While the celebrity anecdotes are enjoyable, Taupin is vague about his relationships, both with his four wives and with Elton. Likewise, his creative life. Given that he's responsible for the words to some of the greatest songs of all time, it would be a treat to read about the inspiration for some of those and their creative process, yet details are in short supply. What could have been a thrilling story unfortunately rarely delves beneath the surface. **ML**

TOMORROW'S HERE TODAY: LIGHTNING SEEDS, FOOTBALL AND COSMIC POST-PUNK
IAN BROUDIE
NINE EIGHT BOOKS

★★★★

Ian Broudie's five decades in music includes production credits for Echo & The Bunnymen, The Fall, The Coral and The Zutons, a 35-year stint as The Lightning Seeds and one of the UK's most recognisable anthems in *Three Lions*, so it's remarkable that the overwhelming takeaway from his autobiography is that of such humility.



Broudie recounts his upbringing on Merseyside and turning his passion for music into a career. Even so, he's reluctant to take credit – putting his success down to a serendipitous series of events and chance encounters.

Transporting us from the punk scene of 70s Liverpool, where he witnessed iconoclastic artists at the city's mecca, Eric's, to Hamburg's Reeperbahn in the footsteps of the Fab Four, he tells an enthralling tale, with the wide-eyed wonder of an innocent bystander rather than as the architect of his own success.

With the charm and warmth of an old friend, his endearing style recreates bygone times when social networking consisted of word-of-mouth, friend-of-a-friend encounters that could change an entire career trajectory overnight. Documenting the incredible highs and the pitfalls that a life in music presents, as well as being a fascinating insight into his work, *Tomorrow's Here Today* is a pure delight. **ML**

LIVIN' ON A PRAYER: BIG SONGS BIG LIFE
DESMOND CHILD WITH DAVID RITZ
RADIUS BOOK GROUP

★★★★½

Widely celebrated as one of the greatest hitmakers of his time, it's little surprise that Desmond Child's memoir is as emotionally charged and overblown as we'd expect – in the best possible way. Renowned for writing hits for a roster that includes Bon Jovi, Aerosmith, Cher, Ricky Martin, Kiss, Robbie Williams and Alice Cooper, Child's five decades in music have produced some of the most recognisable songs of all time.

In *Livin' On A Prayer*, he takes us behind the scenes of their creation, resulting in one of the most candid and entertaining tell-alls in recent memory.

While celebrity autobiographies have largely become sanitised accounts of late, cherry-picking stories that only show the subject and their peers in the best light, Child has no qualms about exposing the egos and eccentricities (including his own) of the artists he's encountered. David Lee Roth, Rod Stewart and Barbra Streisand are among the names providing the source material for some memorable anecdotes.

Juicy revelations aside, Child's book is an inspiring, rags-to-riches tale of overcoming adversity. He fled poverty in Cuba in the 60s and, as a gay Latino man, navigated the macho posturing of the 80s rock scene to emerge as one of its greatest talents.

A brutally honest and revealing depiction of the music business, *Livin' On A Prayer: Big Songs Big Life* is every bit as exhilarating as its author's work. **ML**

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CLASSIC POP MOMENTS

TIFFANY BECOMES YOUNGEST FEMALE CHART-TOPPER IN THE UNITED STATES

7 NOVEMBER 1987

When Tiffany made it to No.1 in the US on 7 November 1987 with *I Think We're Alone Now*, she became the youngest artist to have an American chart-topper since Michael Jackson in 1972. Just 15 at the time of its recording, the song was a cover of a Tommy James And The Shondells smash from 1967. Written by Ritchie Cordell (who also penned the '68 hit track *Mony Mony*), it had also been covered by *Lucky Number* singer Lene Lovich in 1978, but failed to chart. Tiffany's version, however, outperformed even the original, spending a fortnight at No.1 on the Billboard chart as well as three weeks at the summit in the UK.

Not everyone was impressed with the tune and indeed Tiffany herself, with *Smash Hits* writing that "Tiff's bid for world domination has now hit the shopping malls of Britain, and we suspect it won't be very long before we'll all have succumbed to the 'charms' of this rather wretched thing."

Though not the first 45 from her debut album, *Tiffany* (that honour goes to the non-charting *Danny*), it was the single that got the Californian teen noticed, sending the LP to No.1 in the States and Top 5 in Blighty. Tiffany would record a revved-up cover of the song for her 2005 album *Dust Off And Dance* and another, more rock-driven version in 2019. **Steve O'Brien**

BFI

Produced and directed by Bill Butt in collaboration with Jimmy Cauty and Bill Drummond in their various guises as The JAMs, The KLF and The Timelords, 23 Seconds to Eternity is the first ever compilation of KLF Communications' films.

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